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Holiday Overload

The holidays are upon us, and so too is the rush of blockbuster games. From our holiday buying guide to our larger-than-normal review section, this is the time of year when gamers around the world wish there was more time in the day to play games.

We've played a lot of the big titles in the last month, and the end of 2015 is looking much like the beginning – a parade of hits. I love big triple-A games as much as the next guy, but every year as we await the arrival of the big yearly franchises, I get a little sense of dread that this will be the year they falter.

I felt this way in particular about Assassin's Creed Syndicate after Unity's horrid launch last year, but we are happy to report that despite the constant chatter on the Internet that game publishers are just out to take our money, the game delivers.

We are even seeing some indie hits emerging in this sea of blockbusters, in particular Undertale, a classic RPG at its heart that reveals its charms over time. Toby Fox's game has received some of the highest review scores of the year across the globe, and this month it lands as Game Informer's Game of the Month. This is saying something when your competition is Call of Duty: Black Ops III, Halo 5: Guardians, and Assassin's Creed Syndicate. (We were unable to get a few of the major November launches in the issue, so make sure to check gameinformer.com for the final verdicts on Fallout 4, Need for Speed, and Rise of the Tomb Raider if you want to see the results before next issue.)

The message here is that while we love our comfort games and franchises, when a studio – big or small – breaks the mold and gives us something new, gamers will embrace that challenge to the established rules and clichés. We want blockbusters, but we want new series and worlds to explore as well.

Enjoy the issue and I hope you get all your favorite games for the holidays (and a couple of cool toys, too!).

Cheers,

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc

2015

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Quantum Break

Remedy made a name for itself with Max Payne and Alan Wake – two franchises with names for titles. It may have changed its title conventions for Quantum Break, but it has not changed its focus of crafting story- and character-focused action games. We got the first hands-on with the time-traveling shooter and dove deep to see how such a large game is being crafted by a comparatively small team.
by Ben Reeves

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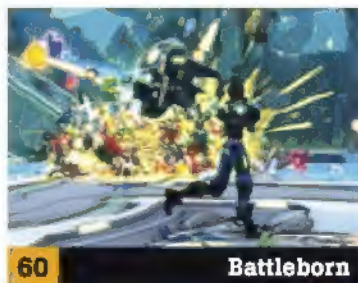
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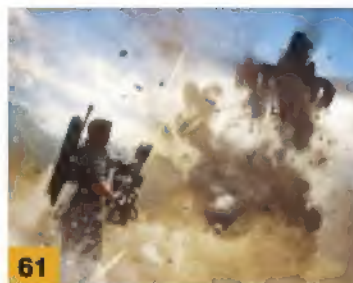
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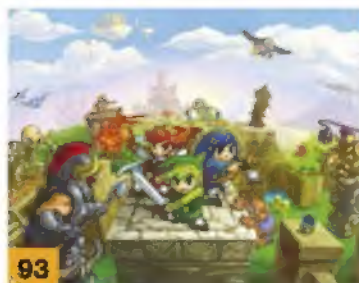
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LIFE HAPPENS IN

FACE #YOURS

PEPPERMINT COBALT
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Downloadable content gets criticized again this month, as other readers set their sights on Konami's handling of Kojima and Fallout 4's mod support. Hey – we get the Konami thing, but what did Fallout 4 mods ever do to you?

Heart And Soul

Thank you for your complete playthrough of Dark Souls, especially all the information that Dan has given Tim throughout the episodes, and his mental mantras to keep Tim going without breaking the controller. Your videos have made me excited to get back into From Software's games, and boosted my ego just enough to think that I might be able to beat one of them. I hope you do complete playthroughs of Dark Souls II, Demon's Souls, and Bloodborne; it's fun to watch and learn from a master player and have a good laugh with the guys playing and commenting on it.

Michael Olberding
via email

In addition to our standard collection of written and video features, playing through the original Dark Souls seemed like the perfect bonus to our month of Dark Souls III coverage. We don't know that we'd call Dan Tack a "master player," but he does provide plenty of insight on what has become a one-of-a-kind series. You can check out Dan and Tim Turi's full adventure, as well as the rest of our Dark Souls III coverage, at gameinformer.com/darksouls3.

Downloadable Discontent, Part Deux

In response to Anthony Jacobs' frustration with DLC bellyachers (Downloadable Discontent, issue 270), I confess that I am one of those bellyachers. I understand why developers create day-one DLC and season passes. I don't roll my eyes when I see the words "season pass" because I feel entitled to the content. I trust developers to release a game that is enjoyable and complete whether I choose to purchase DLC or not. My complaint stems from me getting into gaming before the online days; I got used to and prefer getting my content in a palpable package. I also understand that this is an unsustainable method of publishing. The times are changing, and I already have to download my music and movies. I and others need to become okay with the fact that we no longer pay for a "thing" to hold, but an experience. But until I can level with my inner demons, I'll still be that old man on the porch talking about how things used to be.

Liz Miller
via email

I think Anthony Jacobs' email and your response both missed the point. Gamers today, including myself, are upset about a few types of DLC in particular: on-disc DLC (Street Fighter X Tekken), season passes that offer no guarantee of its quality or timely release (BioShock Infinite), an excess of exclusive preorder bonuses (Watch Dogs), and console-exclusive DLC (Destiny, Call of Duty). We're upset by these types of DLC because we feel like it hurts us as consumers when we choose to wait for price drops or reviews, or just prefer one console over the other. Many of my favorite games have been enhanced by high-quality DLC, but it's hard not to feel cheated when so much of it is delivered in ways that harm the very gamers intent on purchasing it.

Anthony Paluso
via email

Several readers wrote in this month to qualify their dislike of DLC above and beyond the scope of Jacobs' original letter, and many of those concerns are perfectly valid. The loss of ownership rights, poorly detailed (if at all) season-pass content, and inability to buy exclusive content even when you're willing to pay for it are real problems that the industry is wrestling with. We still think the kneejerk objection to all forms of DLC is foolish, but don't worry: There's still plenty for the average consumer to complain about.

feedback

Contact Us
feedback@gameinformer.com

6

The (Not So) Good Old Days

I was enjoying the latest issue of GI Digital while discussing game prices with a friend. He was complaining that gaming was, in his opinion, an "expensive" hobby. It seems quite a few people hold this opinion, which is somewhat amazing to me. Game prices have dropped tremendously over the last couple of decades, and I don't feel that the industry gets the credit it deserves on that front. I remember Final Fantasy III costing $79 when it debuted in 1994! Accounting for inflation, it would cost $130 today. That's at least a large game, but even titles like Mega Man X and Contra 3 were in the $50-60 range in the '90s, and those games can be beaten in a few hours. Today we have games like MGS V and The Witcher 3, with dozens, if not hundreds, of hours of immersive, complex content – to say nothing of multiplayer games that can be played indefinitely. Today's gaming dollar goes much further than it used to.

Ryan Pawloski
Macomb Township, MI

Gamers complained about the new $60 price tag of triple-A games at the beginning of last generation, but the truth is cartridge-based games routinely exceeded the old $50 standard – even without inflation. That said, $60 is still a considerable investment for lots of gamers, no matter how many hours of content they offer. That's why we try hard to help readers make informed purchases – it's kinda the name of the magazine, after all.
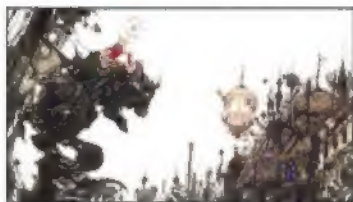
For Better Or Worse?

I'm writing this letter to express my love for Metal Gear Solid V and my grief for Konami. I'm a huge fan of the series, and despite my worries about the open-world format, MGS V demolished my expectations. From sneaking around outposts, taking out tanks, and even micro-managing Mother Base, there is just so much to do and see. This game feels like the greatest swan song for Hideo Kojima and everyone at Kojima Productions, but that is part of my grief. Konami and Kojima's feud seems to come at the cost of losing such a great team, making my enjoyment of this game bittersweet. I'm sure Kojima will continue working somewhere else, but Konami's shift away from triple-A games means the loss of franchises like Silent Hill, Castlevania, and Metal Gear could sadly be a reality. I know that the gaming landscape is changing, but is moving away from triple-A games the answer?

Chris Worley
via email

You're not the only one to lament the struggles between Kojima and Konami while still thoroughly loving MGS V. It's a fitting yet flawed send-off for the series' mastermind – if not the series itself. Whether Konami is financially better off focusing on its gambling and mobile games is a question for the company's accountants. Here's a better question for gamers: Given the direction Konami is going, the loss of talent, and the mobile-centric microtransactions included in MGS V, would you still even want the company to continue making triple-A games for your favorite series?

gi spy

(Left) We visited the fine folks at Remedy this month to learn more about Quantum Break. Watch it with the ram spoilers, Sam!
(Right) Kim got a refresher on Roman numerals with Final Fantasy XIV director Naoki Yoshida.

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY
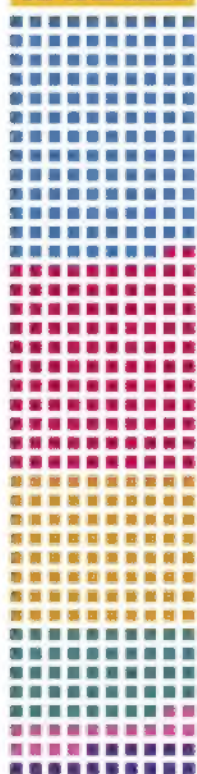
- Favorite In-Game Rewards
- DLC Debaters
- Holiday Game Excitement
- HD Remake Apathy
- Merit Badge-Seeking Boy Scouts
- Game-Inspired Poetry
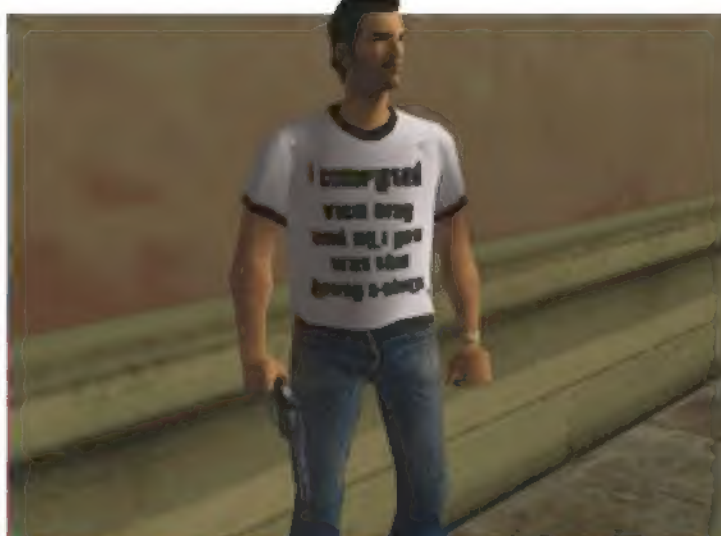
My Precious

In issue 270, we asked readers what the best in-game reward they've ever received is. Several respondents called out Destiny's sweet loot, while others went a little more old-school. Here are some of their responses.

The best I've ever received is the former "most coveted" weapon in Destiny, The Gjallarhorn. I screamed and ran down to my neighbor's house, and we jumped up and down in the middle of the street. Weird reaction for a 30-year-old man.

Ariana Alvarez

My favorite reward of all time is what you got for 100-percent completion of GTA: Vice City. It's a shirt for your character that says, "I completed Vice City and all I got was this lousy T-Shirt." Classic Rockstar shenanigans!

Jason Morrison

The new game plus mode in Chrono Trigger. At a time when massive games weren't exactly common, Squaresoft turned replay value on its head by adding much more than a few alternate endings and story points to an already engrossing RPG. There's nothing better a game can give you than more reasons to play it, and my first experience with a new game plus mode felt like both a treat and a thank you.

Nathan Smith

Mad About Mods

I need to get this off my chest to someone I respect. I feel like Bethesda is focusing too much on modding with Fallout 4 in order to please those who complain about graphics and such. I want Fallout 4, not Create-Your-Own Fallout Game. Can you reassure me so that I stop doubting Bethesda, or does it make sense?

Dylan Brown
via email

We can assure you, Dylan: Your worries don't make any sense. Bethesda's pledge to support mods won't detract from the core experience the game will offer – in fact, the mod creation kit won't even be available until 2016. We'll have to wait and see how Bethesda's attempt to release mods on consoles turns out, but even without the extra dose of user-created content, Fallout 4 should offer players plenty of post-apocalyptic adventuring. To learn about the making of Fallout 4, head to page 10.

(Left) This month G.I. said goodbye to long-time senior technician Jonathan Nichols, who unfortunately had to sit by Ben Hanson during his going-away party. Good luck on your future endeavors, Jon! (Right) This year during Tokyo Game Show, Miller and Kim caught up with Dragon Quest Heroes producer Ryota Aomi. No slimes were hurt during the taking of this picture.

Gallery

1 Amy Joy
A handful of gaming's most beloved characters enjoy a sunset near the tree of life.

2 Aaron Ruiz
We always love seeing new Chrono Trigger art. Now Square Enix just needs to give us a new game!

3 Jimmy Ma
Is it sad that we look at this art and immediately think Death Their faces at it feel funny because...

4 Emilie Luke
[illegible]

5 Jonathan Brunschi
[illegible]
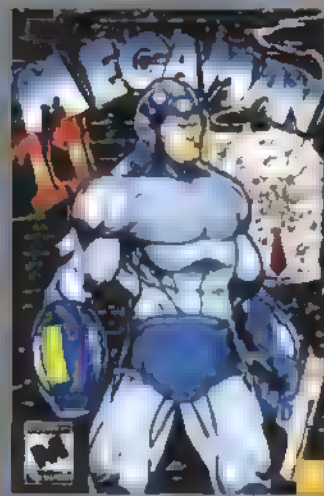
» Submit your art for a chance to win our monthly prize. Please include your name and return address. Entries become the property of Game Informer and cannot be returned. Send to: Game Informer Reader Art Contest | 724 First Street North, 3rd Floor | Minneapolis, MN 55401 or Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com

(Left) During New York Comic-Con, Mike hosted a Deus Ex: Mankind Divided panel with Eidos Montreal's Jonathan Jacques-Belletête and Jean-François Dugas, and the actor who plays Adam Jensen, Elias Toufexis (Right) Mike also got a chance to hang out with his friend and Star-Lord aficionado Anthony Formichella and his son Anthony, who is more into lightsabers at the moment.

feedback 9

connect

THE MAKING OF

OUT 4

The seven-
year journey
behind the
biggest game
of the year

BY ANDREW REINER

Coming off of the success of The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, Bethesda Game Studios began work on its most ambitious game yet for hardware that didn't exist. The team's plans were impressive, allowing players to build their own weapons and homes, and dictate their own fates in the wasteland through intertwining story arcs and relationships that could end in love or death. The development spanned seven years, delivering successes, failures, and unexpected detours like porting Skyrim to the Xbox One (keep reading). Just 25 days before Fallout 4 releases, the creators sound off on the lengthy development process as they brace for players to experience their game.

The sprawling open-world adventures Bethesda Game Studios is known for were once made in the basement of a fairly ordinary office complex located in Rockville, Md. The floors above it that allowed sunlight were occupied by a wide variety of businesses and Bethesda's publishing division. The enormous success of the studio's in-house franchises, The Elder Scrolls and Fallout, led to Bethesda taking over the entire building. The lobby, which was once a sea shared by business people in suits and

game developers in T-shirts, is now a gaming shrine holding an enormous statue of the Panzerhund from Wolfenstein: The New Order, and various life-size statues of characters from Fallout and Elder Scrolls. The T-shirts of the game developers won out. Bethesda Game Studios' office was moved from the basement to the building's top floor, its walls littered with beautiful concept art from all of its projects.

The office is abnormally quiet for the number of people who are hard at work. Almost everyone has their head buried in their computers as they finalize the launch plans for Fallout 4. A timer in the office ticks down to the launch date, but the time isn't exactly correct. When director Todd Howard set it up, he entered the wrong time for the Australian launch, but it still gets the point across – Fallout 4's release is imminent.

Howard is calm and collected when he enters the conference room that has been designated for the interviews. He looks around the room quizzically and tells me he hasn't spent much time here. He says he doesn't leave the development studio often, and he believes this room was once an architecture firm. When I ask him my first question, it's clear his head is still on the present and ensuring Fallout 4 is the game the studio always wanted to make. He leans back in his chair, collects himself, and says, "I believe the first asset for Fallout 4 was created in 2009 – a week after Fallout 3's DLC was completed."

At that time, most of the development team began ramping up work on The Elder Scrolls V, but lead artist Istvan Pely didn't follow them into the dragon-infested mountains just yet; he remained firmly planted in the irradiated wasteland to envision what the next Fallout project would look like – even without knowing the specifics of the forthcoming PlayStation 4 and Xbox One hardware.

"When we began Fallout 3, the first asset was the Power Armor," Pely recalls. "It's the iconic image. It's on the cover of the box. That sort of represents Fallout for us. That was the T-45 Armor. We wanted to update that for Fallout 4. It's a great way for us to simultaneously say, 'Here's how it's going to be true to Fallout 3, and here's how it's going to be different.'"

Repeating history, Pely crafted Fallout 4's first in-game model of the Power Armor, and upgraded it to the T-60 model. That art, created over seven years ago, is in the game today, but it underwent a number of iterations throughout the years.

Bigger and bulkier, the T-60 armor isn't just another wearable piece of apparel that you slide over your head and shoulders. This armor is "authentic in the power armor sense," Pely says, almost acting like a standalone vehicle. When it's needed for war, the armor opens up, gears turn noisily as the cockpit is revealed, and the protagonist climbs in – serving as the brains and skeleton of a lumbering tank.

Bethesda worked hard to limit the number of loads that occur in the wasteland

CALLING BOSTON HOME

The concept for this new armor design came from discussions Pely had with director Todd Howard and lead designer and writer Emil Pagliarulo. Much like people discussing movies with friends, these conversations were informal, often happening at lunch or as they walked together throughout the office. No one on the team can pinpoint the exact dates when these talks occurred, but Howard recalls they started near the end of Fallout 3.

"You try not to think about, 'What are we going to do next?,'" Howard says. "We were working on Skyrim at the time, but like anybody with this career or who is talking about making a movie or a game, ideas come to you. It was pretty early on that I said, 'This is what will happen at the beginning of the game. You're going to play the day the bombs fall, and head to the Vault.' If I close my eyes and think of a world or IP, I see classic images. For Fallout, I see the world that was left behind, the bombs falling, and going into the Vault. Just making [those images] come to life excited me, and everyone else from the get-go."

This apocalyptic vision was put into motion early on. Pely and the concept team started exploring ideas of what a pre-irradiated Fallout might look like, even without knowing what city or region of the world it might be set in. The team talked about setting Fallout 4 in a number of different locations, which Pagliarulo remembers being mostly "major cities." Boston was always one of the early front-runners, as the team gravitated toward the idea of exploring a location that hasn't been tapped extensively for video games, much like Fallout 3's Washington, D.C. setting

This in-game snapshot of a neighborhood shows off the density of urban areas

As a Boston native, Pagliarulo distinctly remembers the day the development team decided to set the game in the Commonwealth. Pely, Howard, and Pagliarulo were having lunch in the office's cafeteria, and walked away on a fairly downtrodden note – they were going back to the drawing board.

"We were talking about changing the setting from something else we were thinking about," he says. "We were like, 'This is probably not going to work.' We kept talking after lunch, in the hallway, in the elevators, like a *West Wing* walk-and-talk, and ended up in front of Istvan's office. We were just standing there talking. Istvan was at his desk, Todd was

standing next to him, and I was in the corner letting them talk it out, because I could see they were going towards Boston. They started talking about the map and getting excited, and I was like 'No f---ing way! No f---ing way!' Todd eventually turns to me and goes 'I assume this is okay with you?'"

With the destination agreed upon, the concept team traveled to Boston for a weekend to take photos and soak up the vibe of the city. "They came right back and started drawing like crazy," Pely says. But the team learned early on that Boston didn't fit into Fallout's traditional visual framework as well as Washington, D.C., did.

The elements of Boston that the art team latched onto were mostly historical in origin – the colonial side of the city. The problem was the Boston skyline of today is dominated with contemporary buildings. Most of these structures were built decades after the point Fallout's timeline diverges with ours. That challenged the art to team think of what a Boston of tomorrow would look like if it were designed with a retro/futuristic aesthetic.

"We're always trying to stay true to this franchise, and part of the challenge is we had a lot of freedom there creatively," Pely says. "We had to figure out what the skyscrapers look like in our universe, and also hone in on the contrast of recognizable elements with futuristic stuff. It's a very eclectic mix. I think it's a pretty fresh take on a science-fiction city."

The team also explored what life would be like on an intimate level for the people of this wasteland. That included the little details like what a living room looks like, what brands they buy, and what life was like before the war erupted and changed everything. Some of these stories come through in pre-war ads – a trait from the era.

Artist Adam Adamowicz, who passed away from cancer in 2012, was a key contributor in this form of Fallout 4's world building. Many of his designs are a part of the final game. He brought a lot of color to the game, and made such a large mark on the project, he was mentioned numerous times for making the world more vibrant.

"We were working on Skyrim and went back to Fallout and said, 'Wow, we were really into brown,'" Howard muses. "It was a stylistic choice based off of the question: What is the mood of our game? The world is already destroyed, but people in it don't sit around thinking about what it was. They don't know that world, but your character does. You're coming into the world and are meeting people and this is their life. It would be like Superman coming to Earth and saying, 'This sucks!' and you would be like, 'I don't know. I thought it was fine until you got here.' They're going about their lives. They are building. They are growing. They are doing all of these things. Not having it be just visually depressing all of the time works with it."

Color and mood shifts at any given time through simple changes in the weather. A scenario will have a different tone if it unfolds in sunny skies opposed to a rainstorm. Radiation storms can also blow in to deliver an instant post-apocalyptic feel with haze and lightning.

The Destiny Influence

Combat consists of the same choices of running and gunning or tapping into the Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System (V.A.T.S.) as Fallout 3, but the team hopes that players don't feel the need to switch between them to make situations easier. Bethesda wants players to play the way they want to.

The team knew the gunplay needed to be improved from Fallout 3. To get the correct feel, the developers had to start from scratch. Their goal? Make it feel like Destiny.

Bethesda made Destiny a touchstone not just because it liked the feel of the gunplay, but because the game also ran at 30 frames-per-second, just like Fallout 4. The team locked in the frames per second early in development, mostly because 30 allowed for greater density. They wanted players to be able to interact with everything and have it all move dynamically. The gunplay was worked on from day one of the project, and was iterated upon right up until the end.

"The main difference in the way we develop (and other studios) is that we will develop with as many knobs as possible," Howard says. "We're always thinking of scale. We're not a team that is just going to make eight guns and spend forever on one gun. We knew we were going to have thousands, so we needed to develop a gun system that had all of the dials."

The team started with one initial gun that could quickly transform into any firearm that would be in the game. One second it could function like a shotgun, the next a sniper rifle. Bethesda's final touch on improving the gunplay came from recruiting a new team member – Josh Hamrick from Bungie, one of the people who made those guns feel fantastic. He joined the team in April of this year and focused intently on tuning the firearms.
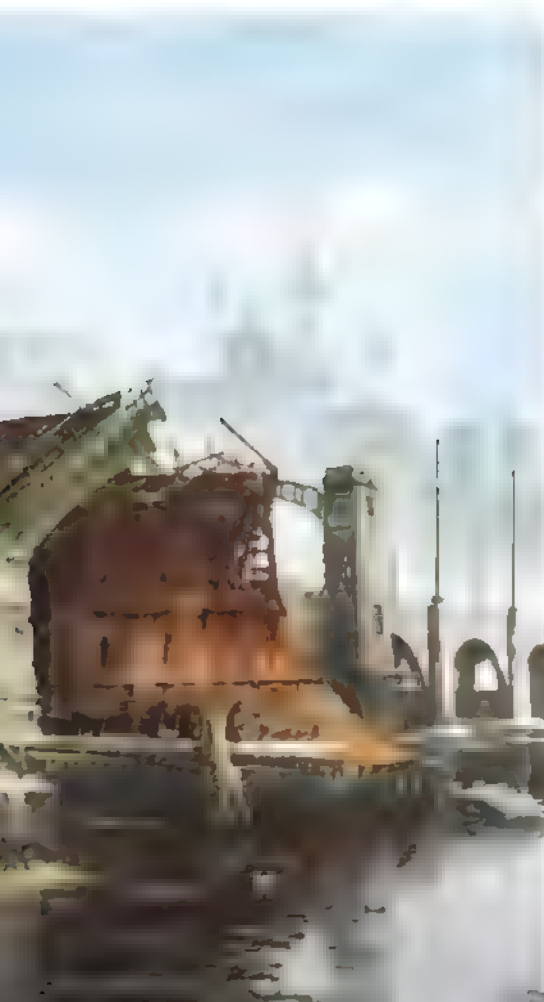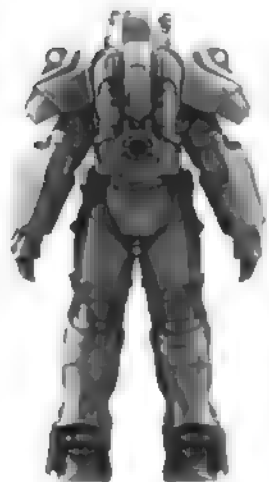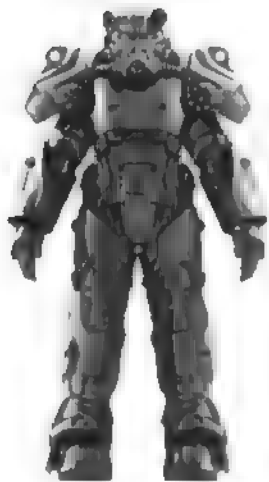
PORTING SKYRIM TO XBOX ONE

While most development teams have grown in size to accommodate the challenges of new-gen game creation, Fallout 4's team didn't budge much, remaining at just over 100 people. Howard believes his team has only grown by eight people since Skyrim. Most of the team has worked together for over a decade, chemistry that everyone I talked to said is the key to Fallout 4 being so big and ambitious.

"You would not get this much good content that comes together the way it does without that kind of chemistry," Howard says. "You couldn't build a studio and say, 'I'm going to build something like that.' I just don't think you could. We work together very well. We solve wacky problems together very well. We enjoy that process."

The transition to Sony and Microsoft's new hardware went relatively smooth for the Fallout 4 team. Both hardware manufacturers clued Bethesda in on their plans early, and were in constant communication with the team as development began. Knowing they didn't have to worry about hitting the launches for both systems also helped. In the previous generations, both The Elder Scrolls: Morrowind and Oblivion were targeted as launch titles. The fastest way for the team to learn about the new machines was to collect data while using them. With most of Fallout 4 existing in art and on paper at this point, the team's solution was something that will likely make fans freak out.

"The first thing we did was port Skyrim to Xbox One. Don't get your hopes up yet," Howard says with a smile. "We moved all of our data over to the system to learn it faster, and we realized we needed a new renderer. We started rewriting it for Fallout 4 in 2012. To do the amount of dynamic lighting we wanted to do, we knew we needed to have a deferred renderer. It's kind of the popular way of doing rendering now. We spent a while on that."

Bethesda wouldn't reveal how much of the eastern coast would be in the game, but this piece of concept art shows the Wanderer and Dogmeat eyeing a sunken submarine

THE WORLD COMES FIRST

With the tech and art moving forward early on, the remainder of the development team switched from Skyrim's final DLC to Fallout 4 in April, 2013. Although the team knew how its game would begin and were actively discussing key beats they wanted to hit both narratively and through gameplay, the next step in development was building the world. It all begins as simply as sketching it out.

"In all of our games we've gotten the scale initially a bit wrong," Howard says. "Changing that midstream is a problem. So we tend to do that very early on paper." The next step is building the topography in game, and walking through it to make sure the scale is correct. Locations can move across that map with relative ease to find the right balance of density. Once that map is roughed out, the team begins building a vertical slice – the first true representation of what the game will be.

For a game like Fallout 4, which is a sprawling open-world wasteland, that vertical slice is something the team calls "the first hour of exploration." This includes emerging from Vault 111 and everything you see around it. The team spent the most time working on this small slice (which is actually huge when stacked up against what other development teams call their vertical slices).

Knowing that Fallout 4's cities would have greater density and more vertical spaces than any other project the studio had released, the team also focused its efforts on Diamond City, the main fortified area for humanity. That early city work included examples of picking up quests and the new communication system.

The team never once thought about using satellite data to attain the highest level of realism in the topography. Lead level designer Joe Burgess says that's "sort of missing the point. It's more about capturing the feeling of the place. That's when it feels real, whether you've been to Boston or not. It still has that sense of a real place, because it is, but it's video gamed."
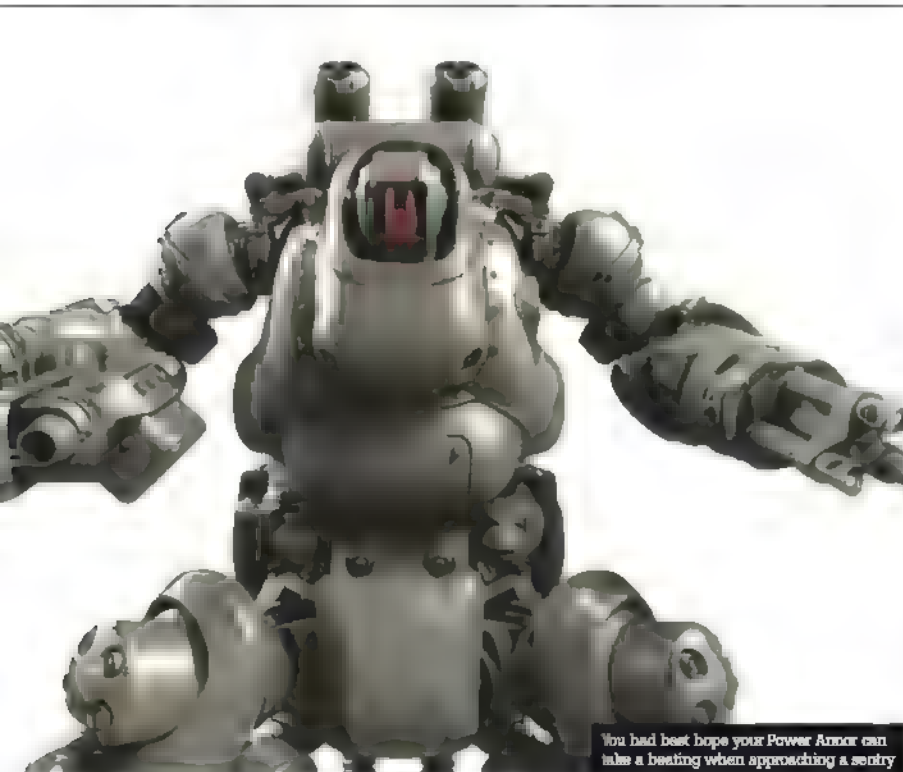
You had best hope your Power Armor can take a beating when approaching a sentry

The first days of building the studio's take on Boston included discovering what the anchor locations would be – be it Concord, Lexington, or Salem – and figuring out the compression between them for real world versus fictional space. "We take judicious liberties with the accuracy of the real world," Burgess says. "Early on, we say, 'Okay, we want maybe these two dozen key locations for story or location reasons.' But then we can look at that list and say, 'We're making these pieces of art, so we could use more factories or another academic building.' We end with a list of 150 to 200 locations, going from your huge locations to small locations."

With the world built in a fairly crude way at this point in development, the team started looking at its density through an internal process called the "Wasteland Task Force." In this peculiarly named test, a developer is placed onto a specific point of the map and has one task: march forward. The point of this exercise? Burgess says it's to create a "s—t list," which outlines where the world feels empty or has too much going on.

"They basically come back and say, 'This sucks, and this sucks, and this sucks,'" Burgess says. "The Task Force sort of saved Fallout 3 and Skyrim in terms of making sure the exploration experience was good. If we shipped it six months earlier, before we could test that stuff, you would have felt more like, 'This part of the world no one cared about, and this part of the world is a part of a big quest line.'"

The team jumped the gun on the first Task Force endeavor, since they hadn't had the chance to play a full version of the game yet, and it wasn't entirely content complete. Assets were still coming on line. "What we had in that Task Force march was a bunch of burning tires and bathtubs," Burgess says. "I was seeing the same combination of things over and over again. It was clear that people ran out of ideas because people didn't have a deep enough pool to draw from."

That Task Force drove content that the team hadn't planned to make at this point in development. One addition was military vehicles that flesh out the story of the days before the bombs dropped. Players will see that Boston was somewhat of a hub for military activity. "Having that bad Task Force pass proved to us that we should really get those military assets in," Burgess said. "We had to screw that up a little bit to see that some of our ideas were bad ideas or some of the areas in the game were way too sparse."

With the world established, the designers and writers started exploring it with storytelling and quests in mind. Some of the big landmark moments were decided well before development began, but the team had concerns about locking in too much story content before the world was created. Instead, the story arcs emerged as the game was being made. This approach was adopted after lessons learned in Fallout 3.

Pagliarulo recalls being a little too obsessed over the narrative arc with that game. "Whenever you start to think about just story, you can really screw yourself because you lock yourself into this narrative structure that doesn't give a lot of player freedom," he says. "We've been doing this long enough together now that we always think in terms of player experience. 'Okay, if this is the high-level thing and we end up here, what is the player doing? What am I doing to get there?' We do have our major story beats, but we also have our gameplay wish list."

Just as the player has a choice to determine what direction they go after leaving Vault 111, the team wanted to make sure most of the story and events were determined by the player. Numerous people I talked to kept hammering home that, if they developed the game right, this game is a reflection of you – how you play, what you look like, and what you do.

Fallout 4 offers more player choice than any Bethesda game has before. This even affects little things like conversations. If players want to play the entire game sarcastically, they can, as one of the conversation buttons often delivers that tone. If they want to veer off of the beaten path to build settlements for days on end, they can, and can even link them together to share resources.

The Art Of Collectible Placement

Fallout 4's collectible Vault Boy bobble-heads and various magazines reward the player with bonuses and even new gear. These particular items are some of the last things the development team inserts into the game. Lead level designer Joel Burgess says the team almost created a disaster with one collectible type. "We came irresponsibly close to being past the point of changing stuff with a type of magazine where you can play a game on a Pipboy," he says. "We of course decided to change it, knowing we may not have the time to do it. The [magazine locations] were all too obscure, and we had to make them more obvious. They all got removed, and that meant other things needed to be moved to fill in their gaps. It doesn't really behoove us to do those types of things too early in development, because those things are joy buzzers and we want to spread them out evenly."

PROBLEMS AND POTENTIAL CUTS

Most video game studios propose more ideas than actually make it into the game. Cuts are the nature of the business, but most of the core concepts pitched for Fallout 4 made it into the game. Had development gone any differently, that might not have been the case.

Lead producer Jeff Gardner had concerns about the workshop content (settlement building, weapon and armor modding), which originally was being made for the mod community, but eventually became a part of the game. The team even put a Python compiler into the interactive terminals, but decided to remove it because they thought it was too complicated and would require a keyboard to let people write code. The solution the team settled on was holotapes that made the experience more visual, hopefully allowing anyone to use it and figure how to connect wires and switches.

"I remember thinking, 'If anything has to get cut, the workshop is going to be it,'" Gardiner says. "We had never done something like that before, and it's big, scary new tech. No one likes big, scary things. As a producer, I was like, 'In my little jigsaw puzzle of a schedule, if that falls off, that's the thing that will make me find time to accomplish the other goals we have for this project.' It was very ambitious, but we stuck to our guns and Todd's vision."

Gardner says the workshop eventually became so popular with the development team that it became a problem, as very few people were finishing the game. They didn't have that data coming in. They needed people to leave that meta-game behind to finish the story.

The world is very much dead, but humanity has found a way to bring life to it
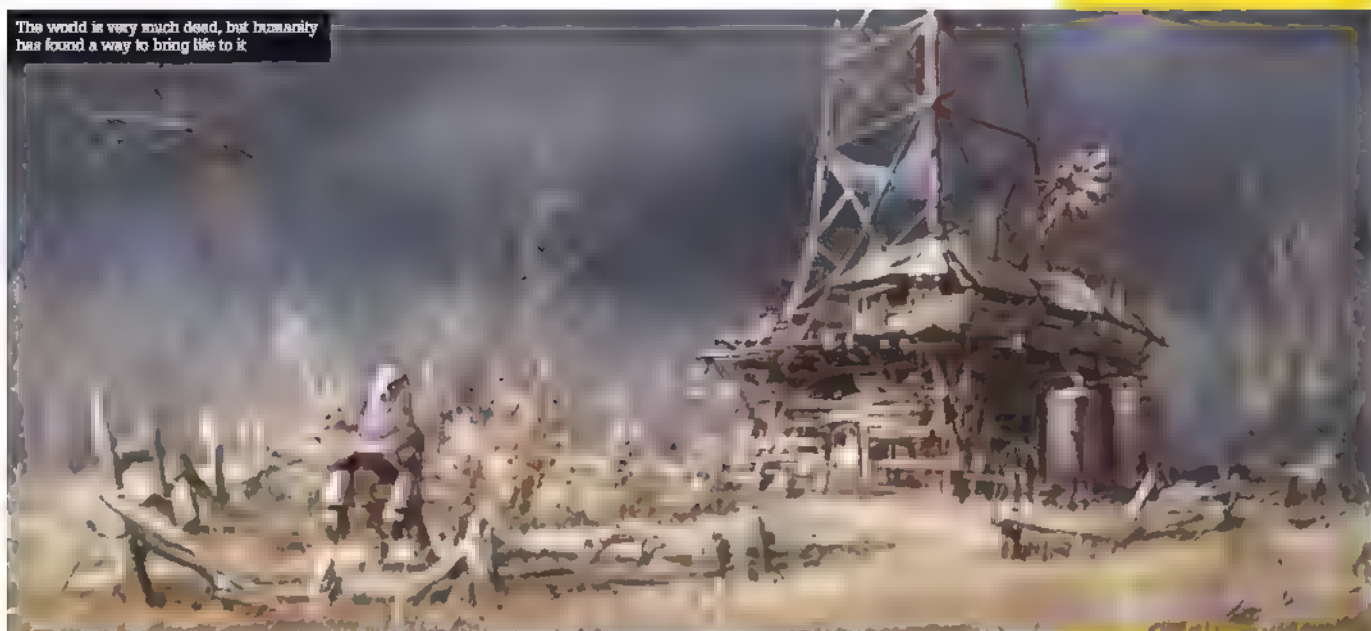
Nature is reclaiming this neighborhood. Mirelurks reside in the muck that once were city streets

The loot tied to these building avenues also proved to be a major struggle for the team. One designer spent three years making that system work the way it needed to. Early in development, the designers would try to maintain a form of economy for items. They thought adhesives should be incredibly rare, so they didn't litter the landscape with much duct tape or items of that ilk. That decision made the world feel unrealistic. If a player enters a garage, the odds of finding duct tape there should be greater.

"What we ended up doing with some of that stuff was holding our horses on it, building the game world the way it needed to be built, and then we took a kind of reverse approach to traditional systems design, like, 'What is in the world and how prevalent is it?'" Burgess says.

One of the solutions was the addition of a perk that allows the player to get more components out of objects. Another late addition was rare variants of items, such as the Carlyle typewriter, which is shinier than others and holds better components.

As Howard quickly pointed out, any change this late in the game could be catastrophic. The ramifications of a simple change are not known until the team tests it fully. Some changes require a few people testing for a couple of hours, others could lead to roughly 200 hours of exploration and data gathering.

IN THE WILD

When Fallout 4 was officially revealed to the world at this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo, it was in an alpha state – playable from start to finish and on the home stretch of hitting its November 10 release date. "Getting Game of the Show at E3 blew us away," Howard says. "We'd been working so hard for so long, and that kind of response was the perfect shot in the arm we needed to make the final push."

After the E3 showing, and delivering a few additional details at QuakeCon, Bethesda went dark on Fallout 4, an unprecedented move for a high-caliber holiday release. The team retreated to its office to play test the game extensively, and add more polish than they have to any one of their projects. Not much else is known about Fallout 4. The project has remained under lock and key for seven years. Bethesda hopes fans are given the chance to discover new things on their own. Thankfully, fans will finally be able to unearth its secrets on November 10.

When Howard was asked what he hoped to hear from fans post launch, he stared blankly at the table in front of him for a few seconds. "You know, people have really waited for this, and we've waited to make it as well, so it goes beyond just going in and giving it our all. It was a bigger deal to us this time, I think. That might sound a little bit cliché, but the time someone spends playing our game that's important time for them. This type of entertainment, and being in this world, and being a part of something they really love... We have a responsibility to do everything we can to make that incredible. That thought permeated the studio." ◆

Build Your Own Galactic Civil War

Fantasy Flight's Star Wars: Rebellion lets you reshape Star Wars history

by Matt Miller

As the Star Destroyer chases Princess Leia's Tantive IV ship across the space above Tatooine, the whole course of the Star Wars saga hangs in the balance. What if Leia isn't captured? What if Luke never joins the Rebellion? What if the peaceful planet of Alderaan avoids its grim fate at the end of the Death Star's superlaser?

Fantasy Flight's new board game puts you and up to three of your friends in charge of either the fledgling Rebel Alliance or the overpowering Empire in an asymmetric battle for control of the galaxy. Each session of the board game opens at the beginning of *Episode IV: A New Hope*, but from there, your decisions shape the course of the conflict. The board game is a collision of strategic troop deployment, planetary and space battles, and named heroes and villains whose stories play out across the original trilogy. We visited Fantasy Flight to play the new game and speak to its designers about bringing the iconic fiction to life.

"You've got a galaxy that's in a very interesting transition point," says game designer Corey Konieczka. "The Empire has become this huge presence. The Senate has been dissolved. The fledgling rebels have just started becoming a threat. And you've got all sorts of interesting tropes that you see there. The epic space battles, the intrigue, the stories about the characters. We're trying to capture all of that."

For inspiration, Fantasy Flight looked repeatedly to the tone and themes of the original trilogy, and tried to craft a game that evokes the classic Star Wars dynamic in every game session. The gameplay loop is focused on territory control, smart troop deployment, and careful use of your named heroes. "We want to make you really feel like you're a part of that – that you're a key player making these decisions on a high strategic level about what your characters and ships are doing, and the different missions you should go on."

At first glance Rebellion looks like a Star Wars version of Risk. But after just one play session, it's clear that Rebellion is something else entirely. Moving tiny plastic star destroyers and AT-ATs to occupy planetary systems provides the thrill of a war simulation, but just like in the movies, the real focus is on characters.

Each team begins with four heroes – characters like Darth Vader and Admiral Ackbar – each with his or her own distinct skills like diplomacy and logistics. As the game continues, more familiar faces enter play through recruitment, and up to eight of the twelve available heroes on each side can enter any given game. These characters are the movers and shakers of the fiction, and everything is driven by how you deploy them each turn. Do you

send Luke Skywalker on a mission to Mandalore, or have him lead a fleet deployment to Naboo? Should Boba Fett attempt to capture Mon Mothma during her diplomatic envoy to Nal Hutta, or should he stay in reserve to counter Han Solo's potential trickery? The idea that a small group of people can change the galaxy defines Star Wars: Rebellion, and sets it apart from many other board games in the genre.

Another fascinating aspect of Rebellion is its asymmetric structure. The Empire appears at first to be the obvious favorite, with more deployable ships, greater starting control of planets, and the devastating Death Star prepared to rain death on hapless planets. Yes, you can blow up entire planets. And yet, the guerrilla tactics of the Rebel Alliance are a perfect counter, as they inspire hope instead of instilling fear by sabotaging Imperial shipyards and deploying hit-and-run tactics against larger fleets. "Each side has different objectives," Konieczka says. "The Rebels are trying to deal a crippling blow to the Empire, and prove to the rest of the galaxy that

these guys can be taken down – that if we all unite together, we can liberate the galaxy. The Emperor knows that the Rebels are a bigger threat than they might seem." To reflect this, the Rebels have secret objectives to complete. With each Alliance victory, they give the Empire less time to track down their hidden base on one of the game's 32 planets. But if that base is uncovered and destroyed, the Empire is in place to rule in victory through fear.

From a visual perspective, Star Wars: Rebellion is impressive, but it's not a game for a small table. Two full-sized connected boards show the scope of the galactic playspace: Coruscant sits at the bottom, with an arc of 32 total planets arrayed beyond. "We talked with Lucasfilm a lot about which planets to include. What do they build? Where are they located?" says producer Steven Kimball. The Empire begins with control of the most powerful systems. "The sheer number of Imperial forces is impressive. Before you play anything, you know that the Emperor has this juggernaut that is

going to sweep through the galaxy."

Intricate plastic miniatures represent the two opposing armies, with distinct figures for outer space combat (like X-Wings and Super Star Destroyers) to ground units (like AT-STs and ion cannons). Sturdy cardboard standees of each hero tower above the board – a subtle acknowledgment of the way one character can turn the tide of a game. One side of the board hosts a build queue for both forces, indicating everything from how long the Rebels have to wait for their new shield generator to the looming threat of a second Death Star. On the opposite side of the board, a turn tracker reveals how long the Empire has to track down the Rebel scum, along with the burgeoning Alliance forces hidden away at the Rebel base, even if its actual location remains a secret. Players sit opposite one another, and use a double-sided faction sheet to track their forces; the opposite side includes split control for a ship admiral and ground-forces general, for games of three or four players.

For me, the game's greatest triumph is the emergent narrative that unfolds, and it's easy to see how each replay would tell a different story. Leia can go to Dagobah and learn of the Force from Yoda. Han Solo might be turned to the dark side. Grand Moff Tarkin might destroy Naboo. No matter the path of the story, Star Wars: Rebellion works because it nails that unmistakable Star Wars feeling, in which pulp action meets sci-fi grandeur, and larger-than-life heroes play out their relationships against a galactic backdrop. Fantasy Flight hopes that when Star Wars: Rebellion releases in 2016, it's the people sitting around the table who will shape the course of galactic affairs ◈

$126,480 RAISED
OF $125,000 GOAL

101.2% FUNDED

This campaign has ended

Outer Wilds is a space exploration game where you uncover the mysteries of a solar system stuck in a time loop. Blast off into a fully physically simulated cosmos and seamlessly journey from planet to planet in search of the answers hidden in the unknown.

BY MOBIUS DIGITAL

Funding With Fig

Veteran indie developers are banding together to help other indies raise money – and kick something back to accredited investors, too

By Jeff Cork

Kickstarter has been good to Brian Fargo. The CEO of inXile Entertainment has successfully funded three high-profile games through the crowdfunding site, raising more than $1 million each for The Wasteland 2, Torment: Tides of Numenera, and The Bard's Tale IV. "It's been a game-changer for our company, and the people there have been wonderful, too," Fargo says. "It's been nothing but an incredible experience – why would I try anything else?" The answer is simple. "Ultimately, my job is to figure out how to finance our games fully. .Typically, for us, Kickstarter only covers a portion of the costs associated with making these games."

Fargo is one of several indie developers – including Double Fine's Tim Schafer, Obsidian's Feargus Urquhart, and Harmonix's Alex Rigopulos – who are banding together in a new crowdsourcing enterprise. The venture, Fig, is superficially similar to familiar sites like Kickstarter and Indiegogo, with a significant difference: Backers of a project can choose from a variety of typical swag or, if they're interested and have the cash, actually become an investor and reap the financial rewards if a game is a success.

Fig launched in August with its first campaign, Mobius Digital's time-looping adventure Outer Wilds. "Our first thing we wanted to prove out to ourselves was that we could leverage the existing communities and the influence from the coalition of studios to help an indie that didn't have a community, who we thought had a lot

of promise to actually successfully fund," says Fig's founder and CEO Justin Bailey, former COO of Double Fine. "That's why we decided to make [Outer Wilds] our first project." Outer Wilds did have a leg up, having won the IGF Seamus McNally grand prize at GDC last year, joining past winners including Monaco, Minecraft, Fez, and Papers, Please

Fig is carefully vetting projects that it features on its site. Rather than providing an open forum for indie studios to raise money, Fig's team works closely with developers to determine if a project is viable to begin with. Fig retains a percentage of sales when a game is released, so they have a financial interest in projects succeeding. In turn, developers get help from veterans like Fargo and other members of the Fig team. For Outer Wilds, Fargo says he sent his community manager and art director to Mobius for several days.

Fig is working with accredited investors for the time being – people who are investing $200,000 or who have $1 million in assets, not including their home – but Bailey says they're aggressively working to open it up to anyone within the next few months. "We're actually pushing to have anything that's $1,000 and up always be an investment tier – if you put in $1,000 or more, you should get some money back."

Jeremiah Slaczka, creative director and co-founder at 5th Cell, found Fig appealing, and the Scribblenauts studio is working with the site on its next project, Anchors in the Drift. One of the reasons his studio went in that direction

was how Fig acts as a buffer between investors. "Typical investors outside of crowdfunding, they want equity in the company or long-term equity in the entire IP or creative control over the IP or stuff like that," he says. "Fig doesn't want any of that. Fig just wants to hook up investors with developers as well as crowdfunding together."

"Generating excitement on crowdfunding gets harder and harder to do as there are more titles out there and you're competing with Steam and what people can buy right now," Fargo adds. "People never get tired of making money, so that will never get old or unexciting." ◈

Justin Bailey

The Good

NINTENDO has started shipping development kits for its forthcoming Nintendo NX system, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. The report speculates the console could come out next year, and cites sources familiar with Nintendo's development plans who claim the unit – using "industry-leading chips" – would be comprised of a base console and at least one mobile unit that could work together or separately.

VOICE ACTORS may go on strike to force discussions with publishers about workplace conditions. The SAG-AFTRA union representing voice actors has authorized a strike, but as of the time of this writing, it has not occurred. The issues the union and actors want to negotiate include a limit of "vocally stressful" hours in a daily session, more transparency for the sessions, residuals, and the presence of stunt coordinators for mo-cap work. The publishers are believed to be asking for fines for "inattentive" actors, the ability to hire non-union actors, and fines for agents who don't send out their clients for all roles. Some of these issues are believed to be simply bargaining chips that can be removed once a dialogue between the parties begins – which we hope it does before video games in development are affected.

The Bad

The Ugly

UBISOFT is fighting off a potential takeover from Vivendi after Vivendi purchased 10.2 percent of Ubisoft's stock. Ubisoft says it aims to remain independent, and in an internal email obtained by *GamesIndustry.biz*, Ubisoft CEO Yves Guillemot characterized Vivendi as a company that doesn't "understand our expertise and what it takes to succeed."
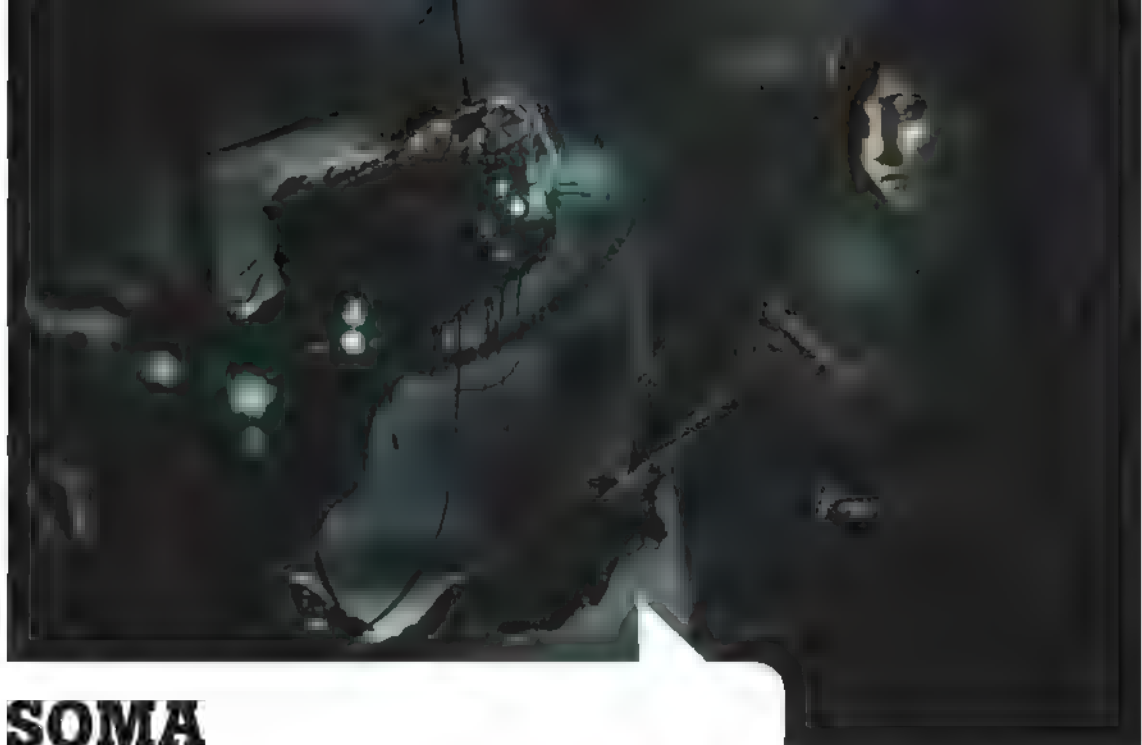
SOMA

The underwater, sci-fi terror of Soma lives up to Fictional Games' trend-setting reputation following 2010's Amnesia: The Dark Descent. We followed up with the innovative studio's co-founder and director of Soma, Thomas Grip, to discuss the project. *by Tim Turi*

Soma asks players to think about some heady subjects, like testing to see how far their definition of human life stretches. Where did this thought-provoking narrative come from?
It all started with that idea of using philosophical thought experiments for a game and having the player play through them in some manner. This is a pretty huge subject, so there was a lot of trying to figure out what to do. I'm also very inspired by reading [non-fiction books] about neuroscience and philosophy of the mind. I read a book by Greg Egan and he brought up these things that had been in my mind, that I read about, but he brought it out through fiction. One book called *Permutation City* just blew my mind at the time, and really influenced me. He took all this stuff I'd read about and took it to the next step. That was really inspirational for me. Not just in terms of creating Soma eventually, but in many other areas of how I thought about the world. Then having these ideas, philosophical thought experiments, and also having a more interesting fictional basis.

Fans uncovered a clip showing off an alternate introduction to Soma, which is a more gradual, hallucinogenic descent into Pathos-II compared to Simon's sudden awakening in the facility in the final game. Why did you move away from that?
Two reasons. First of all, we think the main reason is that it just became too much for the player. We couldn't keep up that level of revelations later on because there were tons of these weird things popping up. Players weren't thinking about the things that we wanted them to think about. Instead they said, "Oh, this environment is weird, this is weird!" We couldn't keep it up for 10 hours, so after two hours or so it stagnated. I think people were more like, "When is that weird coming back? I like the weird. More weird!" It totally sort of broke the experience and didn't work from that standpoint. Another thing was that... the story didn't really fit. This was something that was in an earlier version of the story and then as we changed it, it just became more and more implausible. That said, I totally love that opening and I'm actually sort of sad that we released that video because otherwise I could've reused it in another game. [Laughs]

Between the release of Amnesia: The Dark Descent in 2010 and Soma, we've seen Frictional Games' core first-person horror gameplay in many games. What are some of your favorites?
One example is the Slender games. I'm not sure if it's inspired directly [by Amnesia] since it's two years afterwards, but I really like the Slender demo because it just cut down on everything apart from the scares. It had a very simple basic moving mechanic of how Slenderman moves about and how he kills the player, so that was very interesting to me. I like the game. It doesn't last very long. If it did it'd get boring quickly. I think that's a very okay way of making horror games.

Another game I like is Five Nights at Freddy's. The first one. Again, not sure if it's inspired by Amnesia at all, but I love that it brings forward this horror scenario that used to be cutscenes all through the gameplay. Turn on a light switch and all of a sudden this mechanical beast is staring at you. I thought that was great. Those two are standouts in recent years I think. I would say that Alien: Isolation has some really good stuff as well.

Enemy encounters in Soma feel very familiar to Amnesia. How much work went into making these feel fresh?
Overall the response has been positive, but it has also been very hit and miss for people. While encounters were of secondary concern (the existential themes were top priority), we put a lot of work into it. The idea was to have the A.I. fuzzy and rely more on people's imagination doing a bunch of work. But it turned out that many players acted in ways we didn't expect and then the encounters could get very frustrating. However, when people did act as intended, it worked really well. In the future we have to put more effort in making sure that a bigger percentage of players get a proper experience, though.

Any DLC plans?
Nothing I can really disclose at this point, I'm afraid. ◆

The International Indie Game Movement Continues To Grow

Dusty Raging Fist
PS4, PC, Mac

Lost In Harmony
PC, iOS, Android

Several weeks ago, I visited with the talented indie teams that trekked to this year's Tokyo Game Show, and I discovered several fascinating titles. I've continued to chat with the teams I met there, and learned more about three of my favorites that reflect the expanding indie scene across the world.

Singapore-based PD Design Studio captured the attention of many with its first game, Dusty Revenge, which starred an anthropomorphic kung fu rabbit named Dusty. My time playing **Dusty Raging Fist** suggests that the team is about to find a broader audience. The side-scrolling action/brawler exhibits a beautiful visual style defined by bright colors and stylish character designs, but the tightly wound combat and controls are what make Dusty a hare worth watching.

Dusty Raging Fist is set prior to the events of the previous game. The new storyline is about kidnapped children, and your vigilante hero's goal to bring down the culprits is mostly an excuse for punching and kicking hordes of minions and oversized bosses.

A Far East fox named Kitsune and a muscular deer named Darg are Dusty's strange but stalwart buddies. Distinct elemental skills and combo-focused engagements encourage players to learn each of the three heroes' potential, and you can explore that potential while playing solo or with up to two friends in online or local cooperative play. In addition, the game includes a novel support system, whereby you can call in two other ancillary characters (an artillery and sniper) who take out targets from the foreground; the view pans back to show your allies zeroing in their sight lines from a distant vantage point. The sleek Dusty Raging Fist is targeting a launch in

mid-2016 on PS4, PC, Mac, and pending approval, Xbox One and Wii U.

Lost In Harmony comes to us from Digixart Entertainment in the south of France. Founded by Yoan Fanise, the former content director on Ubisoft's Valiant Hearts, this studio's charming debut is a mobile-based narrative music game about a young man named Kaito. While trying to grow up and overcome his fears, Kaito's maybe-real/maybe-imaginary girlfriend Aya is pushing him to confront those terrors. You control the teen as he races his skateboard through unusual levels, each meant to represent his phobias, like water, crowds, or heights.

Gameplay is an intriguing hybrid of dodging and weaving through a path while simultaneously completing taps and swipes on the screen in time with the musical selections. The tunes range from familiar classical melodies to original music authored by several composers, including Wyclef Jean. The game creators cite Hayao Miyazaki films as a chief visual inspiration, which is apparent after even a cursory look at the game in action. Lost In Harmony has an addictive gameplay loop, but its less apparent selling point is the way the music, story, and art combine to be an oddly moving experience. Digixart is aiming for PC, iOS, and Android releases in January.

YIIK: A Post-Modern RPG (pronounced Y2K) is not an easy game to wrap your head around. Ostensibly a

JRPG inspired by PS1-era graphics and presentation, the game transcends those fundamentals to tell a strange and abstract tale. Your main character is an unemployed liberal arts grad hipster record collector, who after returning from college in the late '90s becomes obsessed with online conspiracy theories. In particular, he fixates on the story of a girl kidnapped by a rogue elevator, and begins chasing down clues.

The game sees you wandering a world that is at times mundane, and then suddenly surreal and haunting. Up to nine characters join your party, and each can acquire a dozen skills. In battle, these skills play out as WarioWare-esque microgames; by successfully completing the five-second tasks, your ability triggers, lending an interesting variety and need for quick response to the otherwise familiar RPG combat flow. My brief time exploring the world confirmed that YIIK is a game unlike anything else headed to market, and I'm eager to play more. U.S.-based developer Ackk Studios is hoping to launch between December and February on PS4, Wii U, Vita, PC, Mac, and Linux.
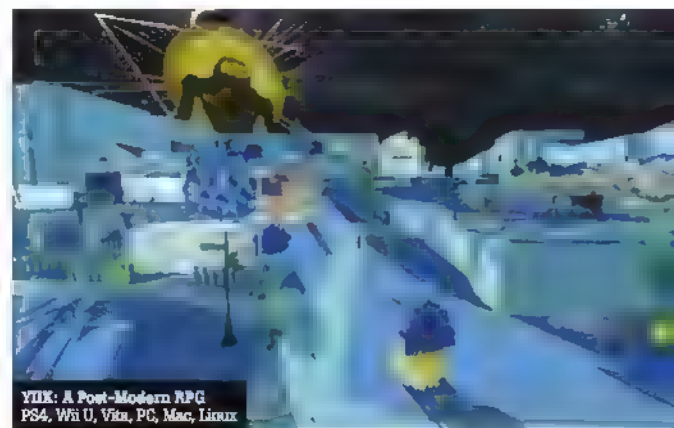
YIIK: A Post-Modern RPG
PS4, Wii U, Vita, PC, Mac, Linux

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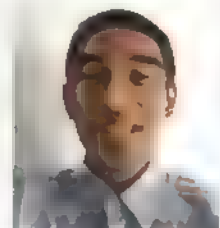
The Mario Maker Master

Alex "Panga" Tan

Occupation:
Student

Twitter:
@PangaeaPanga

Location:
Connecticut

Alex "Panga" Tan has made a name for himself by creating incredibly difficult Super Mario Maker levels. Many have played his levels as they gain in popularity, but they have some of the lowest completion rates. They're not impossible to beat, but they certainly seem that way, even after seeing a successful playthrough. We spoke with Tan about his creation process and history with the Mario franchise.

by Kyle Hilliard

Do you have a history in developing games or mods?
I have been creating ROM hacks for over six years now. I made my first Mario hack back in January of 2009, so I am very familiar with the process of level design and play-testing.

What's your history with Mario? Do you prefer 2D or 3D Mario?
I primarily grew up with Super Mario World. It was my go-to game and favorite game. I own an NES, SNES, N64, GameCube, Wii, and Wii U, and most of the games I own consist of Mario. I did not really focus too much on any one game except for SMW, so I'm more familiar with 2D over 3D. I guess I prefer 2D.

Has the excitement around your Mario Maker work inspired your design or pushed you to create original games?
To me, Mario Maker is just another program that allows people to create levels. The only difference is that people can easily play and share one another's levels, which is something that was kind of difficult (but still possible) to do prior to Mario Maker. However, it still allows me to really see how creative I can get when designing levels and abusing each games' uniqueness to their respective limits.

How long does it take to create and beat one of your levels?
On average, it takes around five hours to make a level. Creating and beating a level are different processes. Depending on the difficulty of the level I am trying to make, it can take anywhere from five minutes to nine hours.

What's your favorite feedback you've received on your levels?
The best feedback I have gotten is that my levels are hard yet fun. It's no secret that playing something difficult will make one frustrated, but being able to design around a level that is both replayable and enjoyable is

something I'm most proud of.

Are you excited to see players beat your levels, or does it just push you to make the level even harder?
It's always cool to see someone attempt your creation and try to beat it. You get to see the different techniques people use to overcome the same obstacle. It is also a great reward for both the player and myself when someone beats my level because the player is happy that he or she succeeded in surpassing the difficult level, and I get to indulge in their happiness. The only time they inspire me to make harder levels is when I intentionally try to create a psuedo-impossible level, and people are skilled enough to beat it.

Are there any improvements you would like to see made to Mario Maker?
One thing I would like to see in Mario Maker is a checkpoint system. That would be nice to have ◆

XBOX ONE ELITE
Wireless Controller

The Xbox One controller is praised for its form and function, and is more than capable of handling the wear of the average gamer. But with the rise of competitive gaming, some now demand more from their controllers, causing the majority of pros to play on pricey custom controllers molded to their specific playstyles. In response, Xbox has forged a partnership with industry leader Scuf Gaming to produce the Xbox One Elite wireless controller.

To appeal to more than just the mainstream gamer, Xbox has made nearly every aspect of the Elite controller customizable. You can easily peel the magnetic d-pad and sticks off the face of the controller and change them out for different ones. The gamepad also features hair trigger locks, giving you more control over the triggers' range of motion. Since the hair triggers are adjusted with a flick of a switch, the Elite has a clear advantage over Scuf's offerings; the third-party manufacturer requires you to use a special tool to open the controller to adjust the triggers.

The programmable paddles, which allow you to use the face buttons without taking your thumb off the sticks, are also removable, but they come in handy for several games. Retraining yourself to use them is tough, but braving the learning curve is worth it. My first matches in Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare didn't go well, but soon I was raking in kills while airborne. In Gears of War: Ultimate Edition, mapping the sprint button to a paddle let me keep my thumb on the right stick and do a better job of steering Marcus through the labyrinth of waist-high walls. With Mortal Kombat X, the multidirectional d-pad offers more precise combination input, but the paddles got in my way more than they helped so I removed them after the first match.

The Accessories app allows you to further personalize the controller. Using deep customization options, you can change the button mapping, adjust the sensitivity and the ramp-up speed for each stick, set the sensitivity for each trigger, and even change the rumble intensity of each motor. You can save these configurations to your system and easily set them as the controller's default within the app or using the built-in profile switch as you jump from game to game.

The Elite's stainless-steel components and four paddles immediately differentiate it visually, and the rubberized grips and perfectly balanced weight make it even more comfortable to hold than the already exceptional stock gamepad. Even after long gaming sessions, the Elite still feels great in your hands.

The Xbox One Elite controller is one of the most versatile controllers ever released, but it's meant for the hardcore gamer. It's an outstanding premium option that holds several advantages over Scuf's pads. However, if you just want a more comfortable controller and don't plan on digging into the tuning options or learning to use the paddles, you can probably save some cash by using aftermarket products to modify your existing gamepad. ◆

Play Like The Pros

The Xbox Accessories app, which allows you to customize your controller's configuration, also features several preloaded configurations for certain games and situations straight from the developers themselves. As of now, the app features four different configurations for Halo 5, two for Forza 6, and one for Sunset Overdrive. Going forward, developers can update this app with their preferred configurations

VERY GOOD

$149 | *xbox.com*

Gaming's Eclectic, Outspoken Maestro

The Assassin's Creed series is known for hopping between wildly different time periods, creating a rich tapestry of various cultures. Music is a key part of building those worlds, and composer Austin Wintory takes the helm for Assassin's Creed Syndicate, bringing with him years of experience and awards for his Journey soundtrack. We spoke with Wintory about building the musical identity of Victorian Age London and follow up on his disputes with the American Federation of Musicians.

Assassin's Creed Syndicate isn't your first soundtrack bringing Victorian Age London to life this year. You also helped fellow composer Jason Graves establish the musical identity of The Order: 1886. It's funny. There are two things to bear in mind there. One is that The Order is [Jason Grave's] score. It's his baby. He and I are very close friends,

and had a wonderful time cooking up some ideas together, but the idea was that he would then run off and go do whatever he sees fit with it. This was an existing relationship with Sony and we had just finished Journey, so a lot of it was infused with having fun, playing around with some ideas, and coming up with cool ideas for a novel palate. A lot of very low strings, low

woodwinds, and things like that. But the other big thing to remember is that with Assassin's Creed, even though there are technologies in AC that are not technically historically accurate – particularly in Syndicate you have the rope launcher that lets you quickly ascend buildings – by and large AC is all about creating something that feels conceivably historically accurate.

Whether or not it is conceivably historically accurate, the idea is that it should feel that way, whereas The Order was very much about, "This is an alternate history where things are very different, and there are lycans, paranormal things." So, even though they both were kind of Victorian London, the Victorian London of The Order may as well have been another universe entirely from that standpoint.

You're using chamber music – a smaller group of musicians playing in tight quarters – to build a focused, intense sound for Syndicate. What else are you doing to help capture the sound of the place and era?
The game, as with a lot of previous AC games, is going to have a lot of in-game source music, meaning music that's coming from the world itself, diegetic music [Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag] did a very successful job of this in the form of the sea shanties, where your crew would sing pirate songs while you were out sailing. That was actually a collective item, and the soundtrack of sea shanties was as popular as the score itself. Lydia [Andrew, audio director] grew up in London, so she felt very connected to the setting of the game for obvious reasons. The Brits being the way they are with upholding and maintaining traditions, she said to this day there is a plethora of Victorian-era songs, hymns, folk tones – things like that – that are still popular, and would have been very popular at the time [of Syndicate], being sung in piano bars and taverns and being played in instrumental renditions by street performers playing every instrument you can imagine. Violin, guitar, barrel organ, accordion – you name it. She told me to flood London with this rich tapestry of source music that's all authentic.

They hired a musicologist who did all this research on these songs that absolutely would have been heard at the time, this is the style that they would have been sung in, etc. And an entire other production of music took place in parallel to my score, and the idea that [Andrew] had is, "I want the music to be heard all throughout London in very specific ways, and we'll attach certain songs to certain districts of the city, because the map actually divides into large-scale areas, so we'll have the area around Buchanan Palace and the area around Westminster Abbey, and the area around the Thames." Working together, she and I came up with a few specific period songs that we associate with a given area of the city.

Three years ago you won awards for Journey's soundtrack and were nominated for a Grammy. How has that success followed you through your career?
It is very difficult for me to quantify in any meaningful way how all of that has impacted my career, because so much of one's career is about the constant growth and flowering of relationships. You develop a meaningful bond with someone who is presumably creative in a same field or an overlapping field of some kind, and as you get to know each other, opportunities will arise as a function of your earnest friendship. At least, that is the way I regard it. Some people would just call it networking, but I kind of hate that concept because to me it's about going out and meeting people and being interested in them and their lives. Every now and then a small percentage of those end up leading to a conversations of like, "You know, my buddy is working on something and I [think you'd be a good fit]," but that's not the norm. If you're out in a field full of interesting people, you meet enough people that it happens a lot, even if it's statistically not frequent. Because Journey seemed to really strike a chord within the developer community, I could see the case being made that if it had won no awards and if it had not had the commercial success that it had, with the game or soundtrack volume, my career could potentially be in the same place that it is, because so much of the work that came after was a function of discussions with people about the game itself.

Last year you had a public disagreement with the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) regarding your work composing music for Stoic's The Banner Saga, a non-union project. You were facing possible fines and expulsion. How did that pan out?
To the best of my knowledge I'm not in the union anymore. They have such an analog way of working. All correspondence comes through the mail and that sort of thing that it's difficult to even know. But basically, the blunt answer is that I quit caring. I was trying to convince people of things that I felt were for their own good and then I realized that if they're not interested in it, and I'm not getting anything from it, then we just have mutual disinterests. So let me just move on with my life because my main priority there was pursuing the gainful employment for brilliant recording musicians who I felt should be work-

ing in games. Those opportunities have basically collapsed for members of the AFM. So it's a shame that they haven't made much by way of strides to correct that. And every time I let myself get curious again and look into it I'm told that they're working hard to change the contracts and things like that and all power to them if they succeed there. But in the interim I've said I've got too much going on in my life that matters to me to use any more bandwidth. It's just they're so self-sabotaging. It's an organization that fundamentally just doesn't understand how the game industry works and it's to their detriment. And it's a shame because the actual members – the rank and file musicians – are spectacular, and I would love to see them working in games.

You have a very eclectic discography, from indie credits on games like Sunset to big blockbusters like Assassin's Creed Syndicate. Can you talk about the differences between composing for indie and triple-A projects?
I would say first off it's a little deceiving to regard it as binary. Like, there's a triple-A world and then there's the indie world, because both triple-A and indie have internal, wide spectra of scope and complexity and budgets, etc, and there are areas where they overlap. For example, Star Citizen is in the news a lot lately, which is an indie game that has five times the budget of other games we would call triple-A. Of course, that's a major outlier, but nonetheless, the point is that the world has gotten very wonderfully messy in terms of how we define and categorize things. One of the things I find so funny about Journey was that if I was talking to friends who just finished working on a game like God of War or Uncharted, they saw Journey as unambiguously an indie game. I was talking to someone that just worked on a game like Super Meat Boy or FTL or a similar game, they thought Journey was unambiguously triple-A because it was a PS3- and PS4-exclusive title paid for and owned by Sony. Is that independent at that point? It's basically if you work on gargantuan blockbusters, then yes, it's still independent and if you worked on breakout hits like FTL, then it's triple-A. So the long and short of that is that I don't pay attention to any of that, I don't actually care at all. I care about who the person is, or people are that I'm working with. Do I like them, do they inspire me, do they have creative visions that I feel like are going to take me places I feel I could never go on my own? My main goal is having the chance to write something I feel I haven't written before, and both indie and triple-A provide that. ◈

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1984
Austin Wintory is born in Denver, Colorado

1994
A 10-year-old Wintory discovers the music of Jerry Goldsmith (Alien, Planet of the Apes), forming an instant desire to become a composer

2005
While studying music composition at USC in Los Angeles, Wintory meets thatgamecompany's Jenova Chen and scores flOw

2007
flOw is released on PS3 and its rich, ethereal soundtrack earns Wintory a BAFTA nomination

2007
Wintory composes his first major film, Captain Abu Raed, which goes on to win at Sundance

2012
Journey releases on PS3. The dynamic, fully orchestrated soundtrack earns Wintory two BAFTAs, a DICE Award, five Game Audio Network Guild Awards, and a Grammy nomination

2014
Wintory composes the award-winning soundtrack for The Banner Saga, a non-union project that leads to public disputes between him and the American Federation of Musicians

2015
Conducts the "This Gaming Life" with musical comedy act Tripod and the Melbourne symphony Tripod goes on to create music with Wintory for Assassin's Creed Syndicate

Holiday Buying Guide

The holiday season provides plenty of reasons for gamers to drain their bank accounts while they march through malls looking for the perfect gifts for their friends and families. We can't help your wallet, but we can save your sanity. Take a cue from our annual buying guide and your holiday shopping will be done in no time. Here are some of the coolest geek-related toys and tech that 2015 has to offer. *by Ben Reeves & Brian Shea*
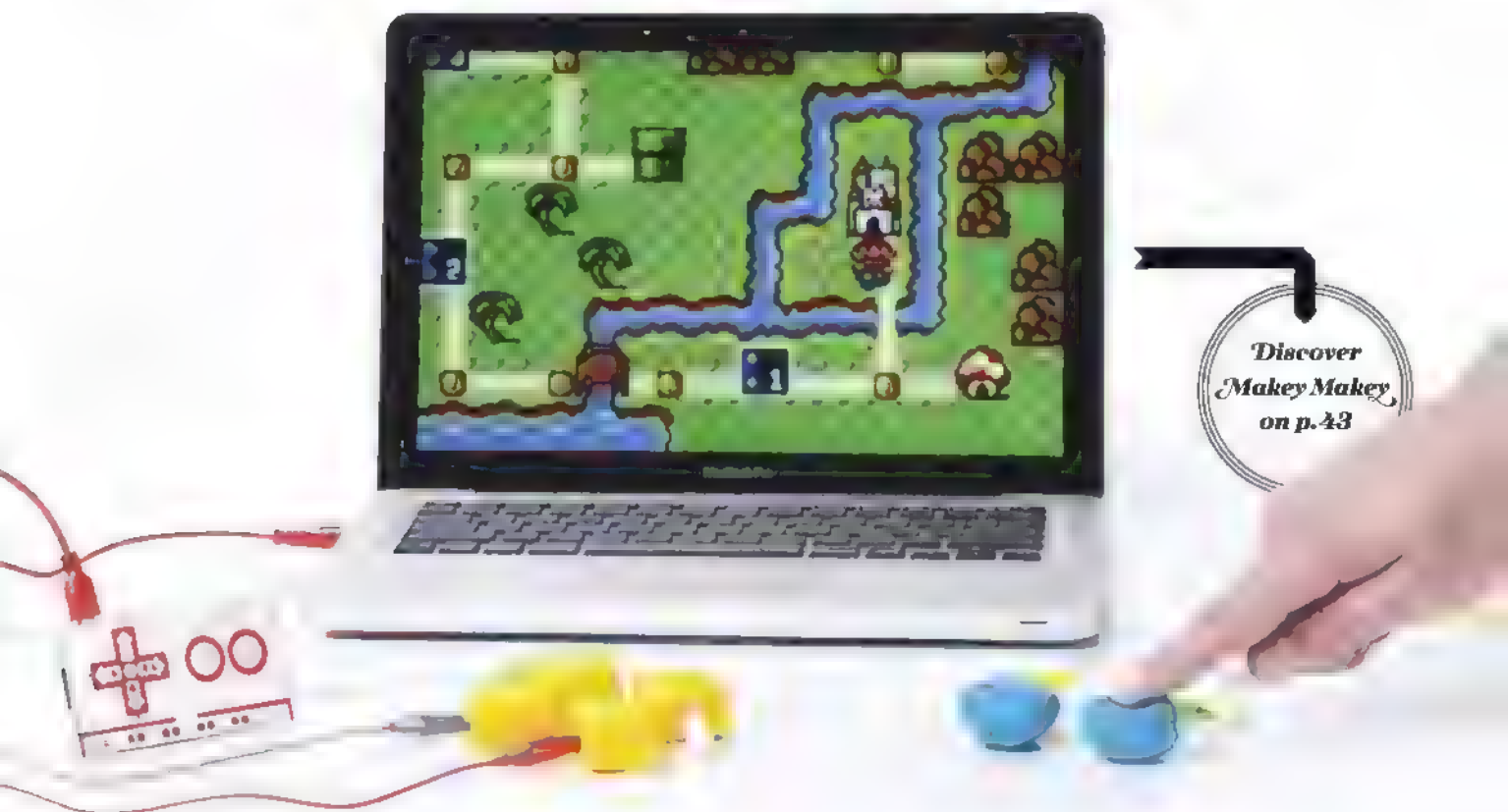
Discover Makey Makey on p.43

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1

MILLENIUM FALCON
QUADCOPTER

See if you can beat the Kessel
Run record with this miniature
flying quadcopter from
Air Hogs, modeled after one of
sci-fi's most iconic ships

$109, *starwars.airhogs.com*

2

FURBACCA

This adorable Furby makes
wookiee sounds, hums Star
Wars songs, and plays virtual
activities via a mobile app How
many do you want?

$79, *hasbrotoyshop.com*

3

LEGO STAR WARS KYLO REN
INFILTRATOR

Build your own version of
Kylo Ren's command shuttle,
complete with storage bays,
spring-loaded shooters, and
extending wings.

$119, *shop.lego.com*

4

RONIN STAR WARS FIGURES

Meisho Movie Realization
reimagines Star Wars icons like
Boba Fett, Darth Vader, and
Storm Troopers as if they were
samurai warriors.

$77, *bandaionline.com*

5

SPHERO BB-8

Who needs to play with siblings
when you can control your own
miniature version of *The Force
Awakens'* adorable new droid?

$149, *store.sphero.com*

6

AFTERMATH: STAR WARS
BY CHUCK WENDIG

As the Empire reels from its
defeat at Endor, the Rebel
Alliance presses its advantage
in this new book that builds
toward *The Force Awakens.*

$28, *randomhousebooks.com*

SPOTLIGHT

STAR WARS FORCE AND DESTINY

Tabletop role-players eager to play as outcast Jedi
at the height of the Galactic Civil War should give
Force and Destiny a try The standalone game
uses the same excellent narrative-focused dice
mechanic seen in Fantasy Flight's other recent
Star Wars RPG releases, but puts an increased
focus on morality, even letting you gain greater
power on dice rolls by flirting with the dark side
Smartly written rules and beautiful art send your
gaming group to that galaxy far, far away to
discover whether your Force-sensitive heroes can
survive the Emperor's brutal regime.

$59, *fantasyflightgames.com*

1

CARRERA RC
MARIO KART 8 YOSHI

Practice your shell-throwing,
banana-dodging driving skills
in real life with this remote-
controlled version of the
Mushroom Kingdom's most
adorable dino.

$59, carreraslots.com

2

SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS
GICLÉE PRINT

This stylish 12x24-inch
Giclée art print from Marie
Bergeron makes us feel just as
intimidated as when we first
set eyes on Shadow of the
Colossus' ancient beasts.

$50, mariebergeron.com

3

BATTLETOADS
VINYL SOUNDTRACK

These tunes are for gamers
who want to capture the
vibe of the classic Battletoads
without the frustration
of memorizing the
Turbo Tunnel.

$25, store.iam8bit.com

4

HYPERKIN RETRON 5

Using the system's various
slots, you can play cartridges
from several classic Nintendo
and Sega including NES,
SNES, Genesis, and Game
Boy Advance.

$160, hyperkin.com

5

WOODLANDS: TRISTAM
BY ALEX GRIENDLING

This laser-etched wooden
map is perfect for the Diablo
fan in your life. If you're more
of a Mario or Zelda person,
Griendling also offers high-
quality wooden maps of Dino-
saur World and Hyrule.

$150, neutralgroundshop.com
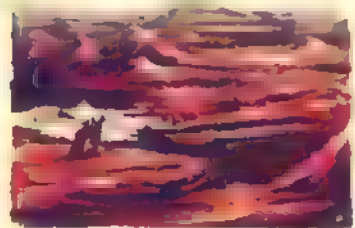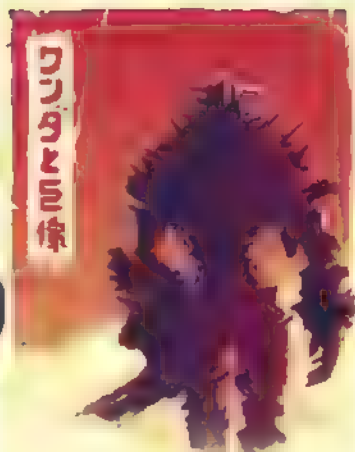
SPOTLIGHT

INK WHISKEY RETRO
GAME FLASKS

If Nintendo's classic cartridge design
gives you warm and fuzzy feelings,
then you might want to fill one with
something warm that will make you
fuzzy. Hide your favorite beverage
or blue potion inside any of these
unassuming flasks designed to look
like 8-bit classics, complete with
parody labels. Designs include
Metal Beer, Double Flagon, and
Fine-Ale Fantasy.

$20, inkwhiskey.com

HORROR

1

THE LAST OF US SWARMED POSTER

The desperate struggle of Joel and Ellie is on full display with Courtney Billadeau's Swarmed poster.

$50, gear.playstation.com

2

WELCOME TO NIGHT VALE BY JOSEPH FINK & JEFFREY CRANOR

Using dark humor to mitigate the fantastical horror elements, *Welcome to Night Vale* (based on the popular podcast) offers a warped look at everyday life

$12, welcometonightvale.com

3

BLOODBORNE HUNTER MESSENGER BAG

With a large main compartment, two small pouches, and an inner zippered pocket, you'll have plenty of places to store your blood vials

$60, gear.playstation.com

4

THE WALKING DEAD SEASON 5 LIMITED EDITION

Whether you're reliving the shocking events of season five or playing catch up, this package has you covered.

$134, amc.com/thewalkingdead

5

CASTLEVANIA SCREEN PRINT

Paige Reynolds and Phantom City Creative artfully capture the dreadful beasts you slay as you work your way through Dracula's castle.

$40, store.iam8bit.com

6

HORRORGAMI

Art enthusiasts should check out Paper Dandy's *Horrorgami*, which allows you to cut and fold gorgeous horrorscapes.

$16, colossalshop.com
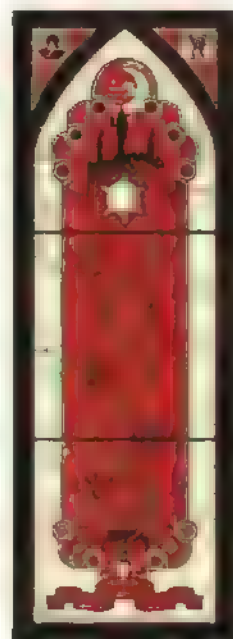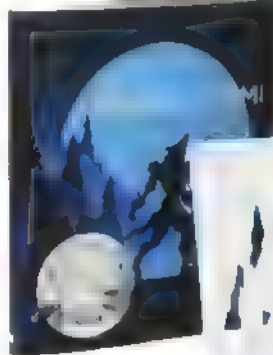
SPOTLIGHT

NERF ZOMBIE STRIKE FLIPFURY BLASTER

The zombie apocalypse is inevitable, so why not practice for what's to come? The Nerf Zombie Strike FlipFury Blaster features two rotating drums that each hold six darts, meaning you can rack up 12 headshots before succumbing to the brain eaters

$19, nerf.hasbro.com
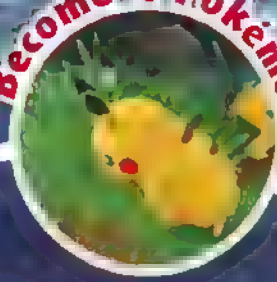
Console Bundles Worth Buying

PlayStation 4 Call of Duty: Black Ops III Bundle

Not only does this bundle deliver one of the year's biggest shooters, but it also sets you up with a 1TB hard drive to expand your game library in the future.

$429, playstation.com

Xbox One Halo 5: Guardians Bundle

In addition to the 1TB hard drive and the copy of the latest entry in Xbox's flagship shooter series, this Xbox One also looks undeniably awesome.

$499, xbox.com

Nintendo New 3DS XL Hyrule Gold Edition

The Hyrule Gold design of this New 3DS XL combines with The Legend of Zelda: Tri Force Heroes for a dream come true for any Zelda fan.

$239, nintendo.com

Mario Kart 8 Wii U Deluxe Edition

Mario Kart 8 is one of the best games on the Wii U, so if you're in the market for Nintendo's console, this is a great place to start your library

$299, nintendo.com

AFK
FOR ADVENTURE-SEEKERS TAKING A BREAK FROM THEIR GAMES

1

Nike's skate-specific outsoles and springy cushioning allow skaters to absorb the impact of any tricks they can pull off.
$125, store.nike.com

2

Celebrate the 40th anniversary of one of the most quotable British comedies with this set featuring a working catapult and rubber farm animals
$55, montypython.com

3

In this comic, everyone has secret identities and one unlicensed P.I. stumbles onto a plot that could unravel society
$49, panelsyndicate.com

4

Sleep closer to the canopy with all of the comfort of a hammock in Tentsile's newest line of three-person tents.
$675, tentsile.com

5

The creator and host of the Internet baking show Nerdy Nummies has a new book full of geek-themed foods
$29, nerdynummiescookbook.com

6

Turn crime into road kill with this replica of the Batmobile from the classic '90s cartoon.
$99, shopdcentertainment.com
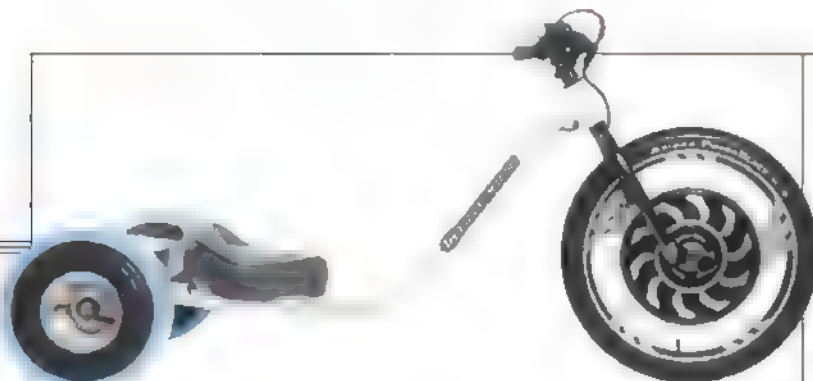
PRIVATE EYE

Nerdy Nummies
COOKBOOK

ROSANNA PANSINO

1

THE SANDMAN: OVERTURE
DELUXE EDITION

All six issues of Neil Gaiman's return to *Sandman* collected in one hardcover set. As the universe begins to fade and dim, Dream begins an epic journey to save existence itself.

$24, dccomics.com

2

SHADOWS OF SELF
BY BRANDON SANDERSON

The second spinoff to the beloved *Mistborn* trilogy explores what happens when magic of the past mixes with the technology of the future

$27, brandonsanderson.com

3

MY NEIGHBOR DRESS

Totoro fans should check out this dress licensed straight from Studio Ghibli.

$38, hottopic.com

4

FALLOUT 4 VAULT DWELLER'S
SURVIVAL GUIDE

Complete with a map, specs for weapons and armor, and a detailed walkthrough, this is a must-buy for Fallout fans.

$40, store.bethesda.com

5

IRON MAN MARK I
EGG ATTACK STATUE

This stylish statue from Beast Kingdom proves that Iron Man's prototype looks cool whether he's escaping from a cave or sitting on your shelf

$184, entertainmentearth.com

6

SONGBIRD VINYL FIGURE

Give your Big Daddy figures a run for their money with this fearsome Funko Pop! six-inch figure of BioShock Infinite's Songbird.

$16, gamestop.com

SPOTLIGHT

DESTINY'S SECRET STASH

If someone on your holiday list is a big Destiny fan, your first stop should be the online Bungie store. Loads of tee-shirts and hoodies let you represent your favorite weapon foundry or guardian subclass with beautiful designs that evoke the art of the game. If wearable fandom isn't your thing, the four-pack of colored engrams should decrypt well onto your shelf or the top of your TV, while the stuffed Ghost Plush can become your real-life sofa companion

Hoodies $54, T-Shirts $24, Engrams $19, Ghost Plush $29, *bungiestore.com*

IF YOU'VE EVER BEEN A CHIEF, A GUARDIAN, AN ASSASSIN OR EVEN A PLUMBER.

Then you're ready to be a Creative Warrior in the challenging classrooms of The Art Institutes system of schools. Push boundaries as you pursue programs in the areas of **game programming** and **game design**. It's the first step toward creating the characters and worlds that tomorrow's gamer will read about in magazines like this one.

The Art Institutes

gamer.artinstitutes.edu

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1

WAKE UP LIGHT & SOUND ALARM CLOCK

Stop hating your alarm clock. Not only does Withing's alarm sync to your Spotify playlist, it's designed to ease you into the morning thanks to a slow-lighting system.

$189, *withings.com*

2

AMAZON FIRE TV

Your consoles probably already do a lot of what the FireTV does, but Amazon's set-top device lets non-gamers inch closer to cutting the cord from cable providers

$99, *amazon.com*

3

LOGITECH G290 RACING WHEEL

We can't overstate how much of a difference a good racing wheel makes with driving games. The G290 works with both Xbox One and PC. PlayStation 4 owners can opt for the similarly decked-out G29

$399, *gaming.logitech.com*

4

JAMSTIK+ SMART GUITAR

Learning guitar on the go has never been easier. The Jamstik works with phones and tablets, offers easy to learn tutorials, and never needs tuning

$299, *jamstik.com*

5

ULTIMAKER 2 3D PRINTER

Get in on the 3D printing craze with this high-quality entry-level device. First thing you should do? Print more 3D printers.

$2,499, *dynamism.com*

6

AORUS X3 PLUS V3

A laptop designed for the most hardcore gamers, the Aorus X3 delivers premium performance at a premium price.

$4,130, *aorus.com*

SPOTLIGHT

ANKI OVERDRIVE STARTER KIT

The next generation of slot cars has arrived with the Anki Overdrive. Simply piece together in one of eight different configurations and download the app for your smart device then prepare to battle on the racetrack. The starter kit includes 10 track pieces, two cars with different attributes, a charging station for the vehicles, a riser for the track, and a tire cleaner so you can avoid pit row.

$149, *anki.com*

AMAZON ECHO

Amazon's new voice-activated device has the ability to deliver you news, weather, traffic, and sports, as well as access your music and audio-book library

$179, *amazon.com/echo*

8

SONOS PLAY:5 WIRELESS SPEAKER

This wireless speaker not only works with your smartphone, tablet, or computer, but also adjusts on the fly to create the best sound based on the music and the room.

$499, *sonos.com*

9

MAKEY MAKEY

Whether you want to make a keyboard out of a bunch of bananas or a game control-ler out of a doughnut, Makey Makey fosters a fun environ-ment for future inventors

$49, *makeymakey.com*

10

LOGITECH G933 ARTEMIS SPECTRUM HEADSET

With full 7.1 surround sound and lighting integration, this wireless headset immerses you in your games like never before whether you play on PS4, Xbox One, or PC.

Starting at $149, *gaming.logitech.com*

11

ROCCAT RYOS MK PRO

This high-end, quiet mechani-cal keyboard features per-key illumination for endless options when customizing its sleek look. In addition to looking great, it has an awe-some response time as well as a comfortable wrist rest for longer gaming sessions

$179, *roccat.org*

12

BLUE MICROPHONE YETI

Whether you're looking for a great microphone for streaming and podcasting or just want to sound better on Skype calls, the Yeti delivers outstanding performance at a reasonable price.

$149, *bluemic.com/yeti*

SPOTLIGHT

SONY X900C 4K TV

If you want a sleek-yet-powerful television to handle all your entertainment needs, the Sony X900C could be the one you're looking for. Sony's slimmest 4K TV to date, the X900C delivers brilliant picture quality that is perfect for gaming or watching 4K video. The high-end television ranges in size from 55 inches to 75 inches and features four HDMI ports and three USB ports. An Android-powered OS gives you plenty of Smart TV functionality as well.

Starting at $2,499, *sony.com*

Assassin's Creed Protagonists

Altair
Assassin's Creed
Players will always have a soft spot for the original Assassin. Altair introduced players to the franchise as he toppled his corrupt mentor and learned the true meaning of the creed. Though arrogant at first, his demeanor changes and he establishes the order's traditions for centuries to come.

Ezio
Assassin's Creed II
Over the course of three consecutive games, players watch Ezio evolve from a young hothead to a venerable master. His life is full of victories and defeats, and we experience all of the key moments alongside him. Ezio is smart, charismatic, skilled, and determined; he sets the bar by which all other Assassins are measured.

Adewalé
Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag – Freedom Cry
Adéwalé may have been Edward's second-in-command, but he's the more interesting character by far. As one of the brotherhood's wisest (and deadliest) members, he cares about more than gold and grog, fighting to liberate slaves and oppose Templar machinations.

Haytham
Assassin's Creed III
The Templars are the villains of this series, right? Not necessarily. Controlling Haytham gives players unique insight into the Templar perspective. Haytham adds nuance to the broader narrative, but he is also a confident and intelligent character with a compelling arc.
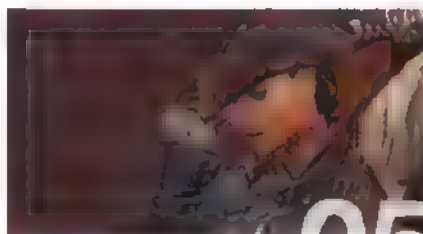
Aveline
Assassin's Creed: Liberation
Assassins are masters of blending in. No hero in the series emphasizes that like Aveline, who adopts different personae to move freely through the streets of New Orleans. She may be young, but she has the strength and courage to stand alongside her more experienced peers.

Evie
Assassin's Creed Syndicate
Evie is a precision instrument when it comes to planning assassinations and searching for lost artifacts. She's not just focused on getting the job done; Evie wants to do it well and in accordance with the creed, making her the consummate Assassin of her age.
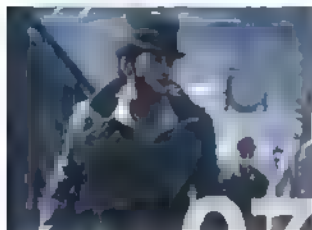
Jacob
Assassin's Creed Syndicate
If his twin sister Evie is a precision instrument, Jacob is a blunt object. He accomplishes his goals, but usually makes a big mess in the process. Jacob doesn't strictly follow the brotherhood's teachings, but he's good at killing Templars and causing mayhem.

Arno
Assassin's Creed Unity
Arno's motivations are simple: He is driven by revenge and his love for Élise (his Templar girlfriend). He pursues both of these passions with admirable dedication and skill, though his life's work isn't punctuated by the same memorable moments as his fellow Assassins.

Desmond
Assassin's Creed
Early in the series, everyone was eager to see how Desmond's story in the present tied into his adventures in the past. He absorbs his ancestors' abilities and becomes a badass – which is cool – but his ultimate role in the Templar/Assassin conflict is a disappointment.

Shay
Assassin's Creed Rogue
The idea of a former Assassin hunting down old associates is interesting, and that's your grim task as Shay. The logic behind his sudden Templar heel-turn doesn't quite click, but tracking and eliminating Assassins is fun if you don't think too hard about Shay's reasons. ◈

01 Just Cause 3

01 Rainbow Six Siege

04.1 Xenoblade Chronicles X

11 Devil's Third

2015
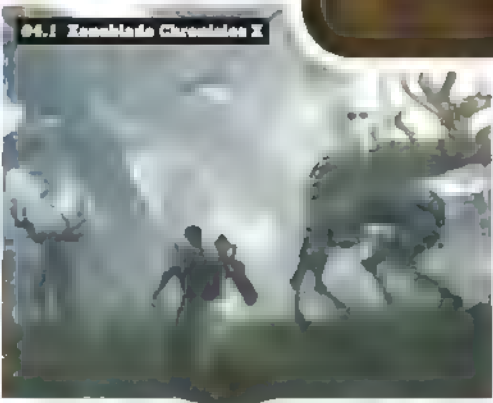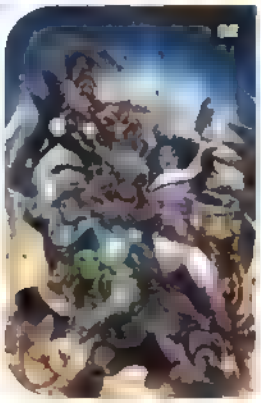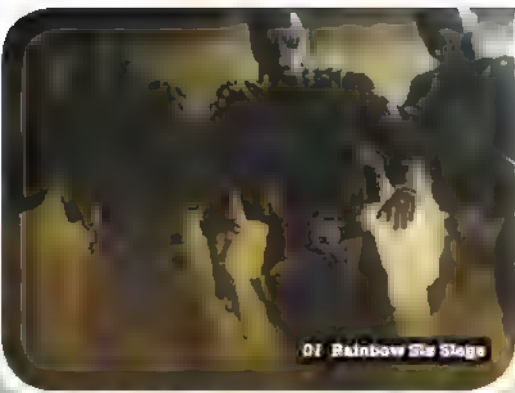
December

01 New Releases
› Just Cause 3 *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*
› Rainbow Six Siege
  (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

02 The New Marvel
The final issue of *Secret Wars* launches this month and gives way to an entirely different Marvel universe. New books emerging from this event are *The Totally Awesome Hulk, A-Force, Guardians of Infinity, Daredevil, All-New Inhumans, Spidey, Patsy Walker (a.k.a. Hellcat), Squadron Supreme,* and *Uncanny X-Men.* Good luck keeping up with all of these exciting new books!

03 The Game Awards 2015
Last year, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* was awarded Game of the Year by a jury of 28 people from the international media

(including *Game Informer* EIC Andy McNamara). What game deserves this honor for 2015? Tune in to a live stream tonight to find out.

04.1 New Releases
› Xenoblade Chronicles X *(Wii U)*

04.2 Krampus
Every year moviegoers celebrate the holidays by seeing sappy, inspirational films about Santa Claus or some bumbling idiot who saves Christmas by becoming Santa Claus. Amid those titles we always have at least one anti-holiday movie like today's theatrical release, *Krampus.* With a cast consisting of mostly kids and comedians, you wouldn't expect this film to be a dark tale about an evil spirit who spreads fear instead of cheer. The trailer makes it look like *Friday the 13th* meets *Gremlins.*

05 PlayStation Experience 2015
Sony's second annual PlayStation Experience begins today in San Francisco. Last year's show brought a host of new game announcements, and we're expecting plenty this year as well. Head to gameinformer.com for all of the latest news and hands-on impressions from the PlayStation Experience.

09 Batman/Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles
DC Comics and IDW's universes collide today in the first issue of Batman/Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. This crossover event begins with the Foot Clan invading Gotham City from a dimensional portal. As Batman tries to stop this new threat, four odd allies join his fight.

09 New Releases
› Among the Sleep *(PS4)*
› Roller Coaster Tycoon World *(PC)*

11 New Releases
› Devil's Third *(Wii U)*

18 Star Wars: The Force Awakens
With George Lucas out of the way, fans are daring to hope that the new Star Wars movies will live up to their legacy. With today's release of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens,* we'll learn if this series will be reinvigorated or buried next to Jar Jar Binks. J.J. Abrams' insistence on using practical effects (like a really old Harrison Ford) is a good sign. Remember to buy your tickets early, or you'll be stuck waiting in line next to a Wookiee cosplayer.

25 The Hateful Eight
Quentin Tarantino hasn't made a bad film. He's like the Pixar of violence and swearing. His latest film, *The Hateful Eight,* opens in theaters today with one hell of a cast. Samuel L. Jackson, Kurt Russell, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Michael Madsen, Zoe Bell, and Tim Roth are united in this western tale about bounty hunters trapped in a blizzard. It even stars Walton Goggins (a.k.a. the charismatic villain from *Justified*). ◆

ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD

Part game, part
show, Remedy's
bold storytelling
experiment is
unlike anything
you've ever
played

by Ben Reeves

For more than 20 years, Remedy Entertainment has developed story-focused action games like Max Payne and Alan Wake – while working at the leisurely pace of a bullet-time shootout. In the span of two decades, Remedy has created five titles. Contrast that with other high-profile studios like Naughty Dog or Gearbox, who have both worked on more than a dozen games in that same period, and Remedy's gameography feels a little thin.

Remedy knows how to take its time, so it's fitting that its newest title explores the action that takes place inside a series of frozen moments. Quantum Break's standout feature is an experimental narrative that tells its story through both interactive gameplay and live-action drama. This blended experiment is one of the most complex projects in video game history. Quantum Break is a gamble, but then, Remedy's entire history has been one long series of big bets.

Before creating Max Payne, one of Remedy's abandoned game concepts was a top-down Zelda-like RPG where the main character was a hard-boiled private eye

In the mid '90s, high-profile game development was localized primarily to Japan and the U.S. But that didn't stop a group of 10 self-taught programmers from Espoo, Finland, from thinking they had the chops to compete in the big leagues. For a little over a year, this team of high-school hackers and college dropouts worked out of their parents' basements on a car-combat racing game called Death Rally. Inspired by games like Twisted Metal, this simple top-down racer equipped players with chain guns, bumper spikes, and land mines as they competed in a series of cutthroat races through an apocalyptic wasteland.

Almost on a whim, one of these programmers reached out to a childhood friend named Sam Lake, asking him if he'd like to help write a few character bios for the game. Lake was studying the English language and literature at The University of Helsinki in hopes of someday becoming a writer. A fan of pen and paper role-playing games, Lake had already written several of his own RPG campaigns. Writing a video game didn't seem like it would be much different to him.

"Writing for games really wasn't a plan," says Lake, who is now Remedy's creative director. "Back then, the concept of being a writer in video games wasn't really a thing. I was like, 'Is that even possible?' The royalty percentages were divided up among the team, and my friend was kind enough to give me a couple of percentages from his portion."

After Death Rally released on PC in 1996, this small team of developers – now calling itself Remedy – began working on a top-down shooter set in a futuristic drug-gang world. Originally called Dark Justice, the game went through a series of rapid changes and eventually turned into the project that put Remedy on the map.

"We changed the game to present day and made it a third-person action game," Lake says. "I wanted a kind of the film-noir, hard-boiled feeling to it, and I wanted to bring a private eye-type main character into it. Maybe he's a cop. Maybe he's a DA cop and there's a problem with this new drug on the streets. And so, step by step, Dark Justice became Max Payne."

Fans and critics alike loved Max Payne's slow-motion bullet-time action, which eventually spawned sequels, a movie, and a series of imitators. But in hindsight, one of the most peculiar aspects of Max Payne was a series of fake shows that Remedy created for TVs scattered throughout the environments. These shows were parodies of crime dramas and Victorian-era soap operas, but they often featured nuggets of moral truths and even paralleled the events of the game itself. Lake was intrigued by this exploration of television storytelling inside a video game, and the developer would return to this concept over and over again. Years later, this blending of the two mediums pushed Remedy into one of the wildest experiments in its 20-year history.

Many independent studios dream of having a successful property it can iterate on as it builds a reliable fan base. When Max Payne released to massive critical acclaim and sold over four million copies worldwide, Remedy had created that kind of bankable property. However, the team wasn't content to be known as the Max Payne studio, so it made a bold gamble, selling its ownership of the Max Payne license to Rockstar Games. Remedy stuck around to make Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne, but then the company took its windfall and set out on a seven-year journey that led to the creation of Alan Wake.

Remedy's psychological thriller was another opportunity for the company to experiment with the television format. Not only were several new television parodies scattered throughout Alan Wake's world, but the game itself was structured like a television show, complete with story recaps.

While the team finalized the concepts for Alan Wake, Lake kept dreaming up new ideas for future projects. He remembers furiously scribbling out a paragraph of an idea for a time-travel epic based on the real physics of quantum mechanics. He titled this concept Quantum and shoved it into a drawer for safekeeping.

Throughout Alan Wake's development, the concept of playing around with quantum mechanics continued to resurface, as though Lake couldn't escape its pull. "There was a time during the development of Alan Wake that it was a bit more sci-fi oriented, and was more about

quantum physics," Lake says. "We even built a particle collider as a world prop at one point. The development was a long journey, and I'm happy we didn't end up going the sci-fi route, but those concepts were kind of the seeds of Quantum Break."

As Remedy neared the end of Alan Wake's development, the team worked up a prototype for Alan Wake 2 and pitched the idea to Microsoft, but the publisher didn't bite. At the time, Microsoft was preparing its rollout for the Xbox One, and it hoped that original television programming would be a central component of its new console experience. Remedy, with its years of experience making games that parodied – and even modeled – television shows, seemed like a logical partner.

Microsoft encouraged the studio to pitch a new IP that explored the concepts of interactive narrative and original television programming. Lake dusted off his old concept
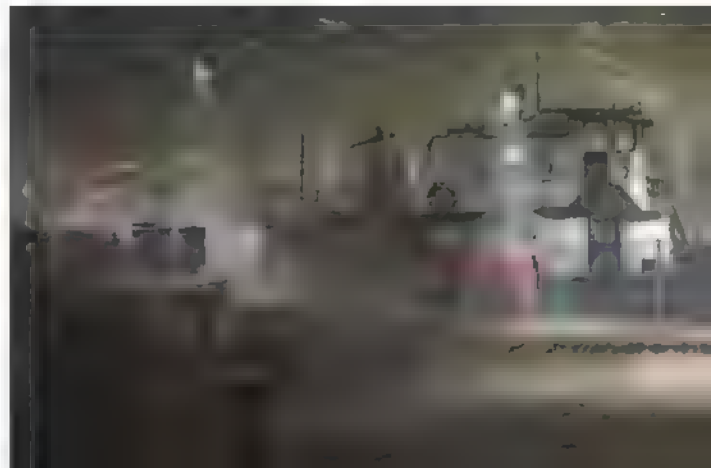
The time shield breaks faster when enemies are shooting at it
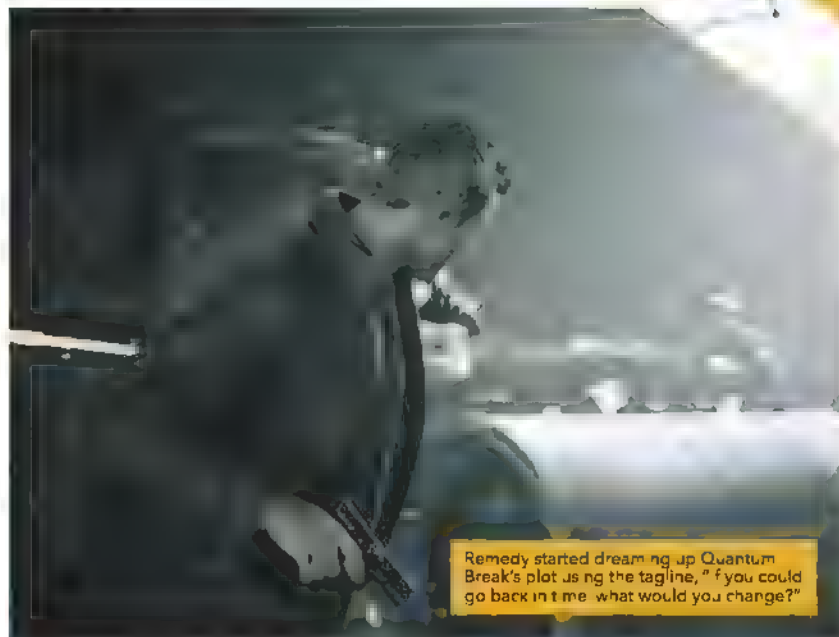
Remedy started dreaming up Quantum Break's plot using the tagline, "If you could go back in time, what would you change?"

for Quantum, and the studio drafted a game pitch about a couple of scientists who survived a failed science experiment only to discover they had superhero-like time-manipulation powers. Microsoft loved the concept, but it wanted the team to announce the project at the same time as the console unveiling, which didn't give Remedy much time to actually create a game.

"There is a tendency to say, 'Oh, it's not ready, I'm not showing this yet,'" Lake says. "But then again, there are many good reasons to show it. The earlier you expose it to people, the more you get feedback and you understand what works and what doesn't work, and you have plenty of time to react. But also just from a marketing and PR perspective, it's important to make people aware that this is something we are making and communicate why we think it's going to be pretty cool."

When Remedy debuted Quantum Break during the Xbox One reveal event in May 2013, the studio hadn't even cast actors for the lead roles, let alone begun principal photography for the live-action show. Instead, it cooked up a one-off gameplay sequence starring actor Sean Durrie. Remedy knew it would likely have to recast its main protagonist for the final game (though Durrie does appear in the game as an NPC), but Microsoft's offer to show Quantum Break during one of the most watched press events outside of E3 was too good to pass up.

"It's been a long project, and as these things go, they evolve," Lake says. "I feel that the heart and soul of Quantum Break is very much what we started out with, but many elements evolved and changed along the way. Looking back, the focus for Microsoft was very much on TV stuff, and they actually made a prototype episode, which was something like 10 minutes long, as a kind of proof case. The materials shown at the reveal were from that, but in many ways it had nothing to do with the actual show we have now. The story back then was completely different."

Quantum Break was originally scheduled for release sometime in 2014, but Microsoft's rollout of its new console wasn't as smooth as the publisher had hoped. Within a year Microsoft had scaled back its ambitious plans for original TV content, which left Remedy's new game as something like a weird side project. Quantum Break blew past its initial release because Remedy still had to figure out how to integrate a show together with a game. The whole project was beginning to feel like a long shot.
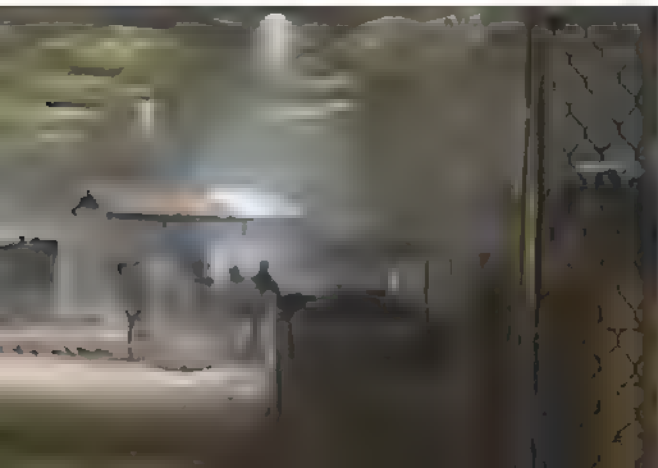
As early as 2001, Remedy attracted the attention of Collision Entertainment, which optioned the rights to produce a live-action film adaptation of Max Payne. The movie tumbled through a series of production companies and had a number of false starts before Mark Wahlberg was cast as the lead and *Max Payne* finally hit theaters in 2008. The film's reviews were far from positive, and Remedy wasn't happy with the experience, but the journey was an important learning experience for the company. Remedy felt like it had bet on Hollywood, and Hollywood had let it down. If Remedy ever had the opportunity to adapt another property to a different medium, it wanted more creative control.

Remedy kept the *Max Payne* film in mind as it began working with Microsoft on the Quantum Break show. Early on, there were several questions about how a game and a show could even tell one story. Would people watch the show first or play the game first? How many episodes of the show would they make? Would the game and the show even be sold together as one package?

Remedy convinced everyone involved that the two projects should be one product. Not only would they be sold together on one disc, they would be woven together to tell a single story. Players would play the game for a few hours and then watch one episode of the show before playing another section of the game, and so on. To help sell the feel of the show, each episode would be approximately 22 minutes, which is equivalent to a 30-minute television show without commercial breaks. Moreover, the game and the show would play off each other. While the show helped set up events that took place in the next set of game levels, players' choices in the game would affect the events that played out in the show.

"I was always pushing for, 'Let's bring them closer together,'" Lake says. "I felt like that would be the new thing and that would be somehow different and more ambitious, but also harder to make."

This unique narrative structure was indeed harder for people to wrap their minds around. In the late-'90s a few games – such as Night Trap and Phantasmagoria – had tried to integrate full-motion video into gameplay, but no one had ever attempted a game/show hybrid of this scale before. Microsoft contracted the production company Lifeboat to produce the show itself. Lifeboat was a relatively new company that had worked on a series of lesser-known television shows, such as FX's *The Booth at the End* and a Crackle original series called *Chosen*, but it brought an air of legitimacy to the production experience. Meanwhile, the writing team at Remedy sat down with a group of writers hired specifically to work on the show's scripts, and the two teams drafted an overarching narrative for the entire Quantum Break package.

"When we are workshopping a story, the writer's room ends up looking like a crazy guy's lair, because you have post-it notes covering all of the walls and the whiteboards are full of all sorts of scribbling," Lake says. "Certainly there has been frustration trying to coordinate a story of this magnitude, but I think that there is frustration in every creative project – even doing it solo you end up in a situation where you're fighting with yourself about certain things. But yeah, it's been a lot of work, a lot of iteration, and challenging. But that also makes it interesting, and the game is clearly something new."
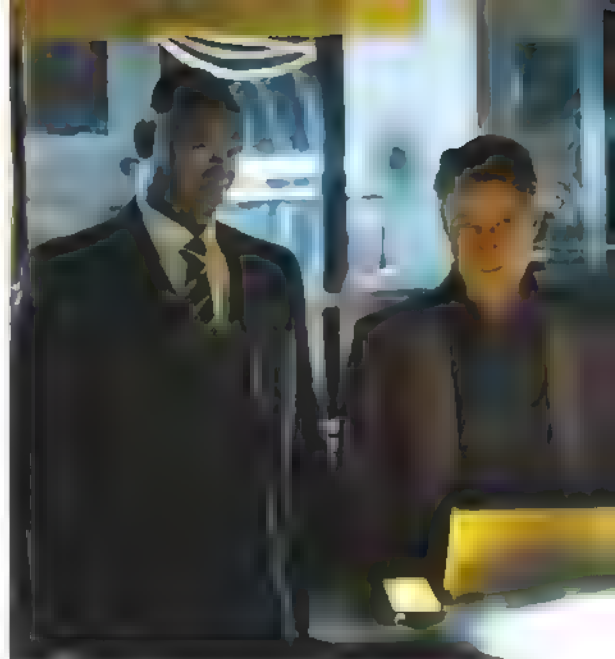
WHY COMBINE TV WITH GAMES?

Remedy has always had an interest in exploring the television format. Both Max Payne and Alan Wake featured in-universe television shows, and Alan Wake was even structured like the DVD set of a television show. We asked creative director Sam Lake why he thought the television structure was such an interesting model for games.

"I think that there are many different aspects to this," he says. "One is just being a fan and consumer of pop culture. A great deal of inspiration comes from that. Games are so big, and shows help you create a believable world. It's easy and fun, and you can kind of exaggerate it. You can do a mini episode of something and just crank the style volume up on a certain genre and do a parody. In many ways, I think it's an opportunity of doing commentary on the story in the game. You're kind of holding up a twisted mirror to the story in the game in some way. I always felt it was important that we had echoes of what's going on in the game in the other mediums. You can kind of play minigames with the story."

While you will miss out on a good chunk of Quantum Break's story, you can skip these 22-minute episodes if you're not in the mood to watch them.

Working with two teams of writers, Lake's original paragraph of a plot expanded into a full transmedia experience. The game would focus on small-town hero Jack Joyce (played by Shawn Ashmore), who returns to the college town known as Riverport after spending six years sowing his wild oats. Jack's best friend, Paul Serene (played by Aidan Gillen), is involved in an ambitious physics project, but his financiers are threatening to pull their support. Paul hopes an unauthorized test run of an experimental time-travel device will give him the data he needs to pacify his investors.

Jack isn't a scientist, but he is connected to this project thanks to his brother Dr. William Joyce (played by Dominic Monaghan), an eccentric physicist whose theoretical work on quantum physics served as a foundation for Paul's time-travel experiments. Will tries to stop Jack and Paul from running their experiment, warning that the machine could cause a fracture in time that would eventually lead to the end of time itself.

Unfortunately, Jack and Paul have already begun their experiment, and as predicted, it goes horribly wrong. During the chaos that follows, Paul is forced to escape into the future, but when he returns, he is nearly two decades older and his mind has snapped. Paul is no longer the man Jack knew; he's been hardened by experiences Jack knows nothing about. Even more bizarre, Paul is suddenly the CEO of a very powerful and heavily armed company called Monarch Corporation. When Will refuses to help Paul fix the mess they created, Paul murders Will in cold blood.

SCENES FROM THE OTHER SIDE

Some of the best television shows of the modern era, such as *Breaking Bad*, *Game of Thrones*, and *House of Cards*, feature morally ambiguous characters. As Remedy surveyed the TV landscape, it noticed this trend and decided to emulate the model with Quantum Break's live-action sequences. The Quantum Break show gives players insight into the power struggles brewing inside the villain Paul Serene's Monarch Corporation. Here's a brief look at a few of the property's flawed characters.

MARTIN HATCH
Played by Lance Reddick
(*Fringe*, *The Wire*, *John Wick*)

Paul's time-traveling escapades have prevented him from becoming a public figure, so in many ways, Hatch is the public face of Monarch. He has his own plans for the company, which don't always align with Paul's.
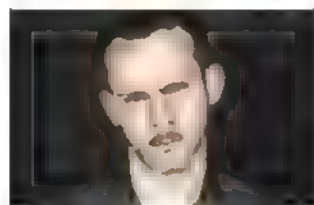
DR. WILLIAM JOYCE
Played by Dominic Monaghan
(*The Lord of The Rings* trilogy, *Lost*)

Will is Jack's brother, but the siblings are largely estranged. Appearing only in the game, Will helped discover the basic particles that make up time. He is an eccentric and obsessive scientist who is convinced that Paul's experiments will lead to an ultimate full stop of the universe.

LIAM BURKE
Played by Patrick Heusinger
(*Black Swan*, *Frances Ha*, *Sweet Land*)

One of Monarch's security officers, Burke comes to question some of the activities happening inside Monarch, but viewers are not entirely sure whose side he's on.

BETH WILDER
Played by Courtney Hope
(*PROWL*, *NCIS*)

Beth is another Monarch operative who has a mysterious agenda of her own. Beth has a big role in both the game and the show as she tries to help Jack fight against Paul and Monarch. Remedy originally thought Beth would be a playable character in the game, but this is no longer the case.
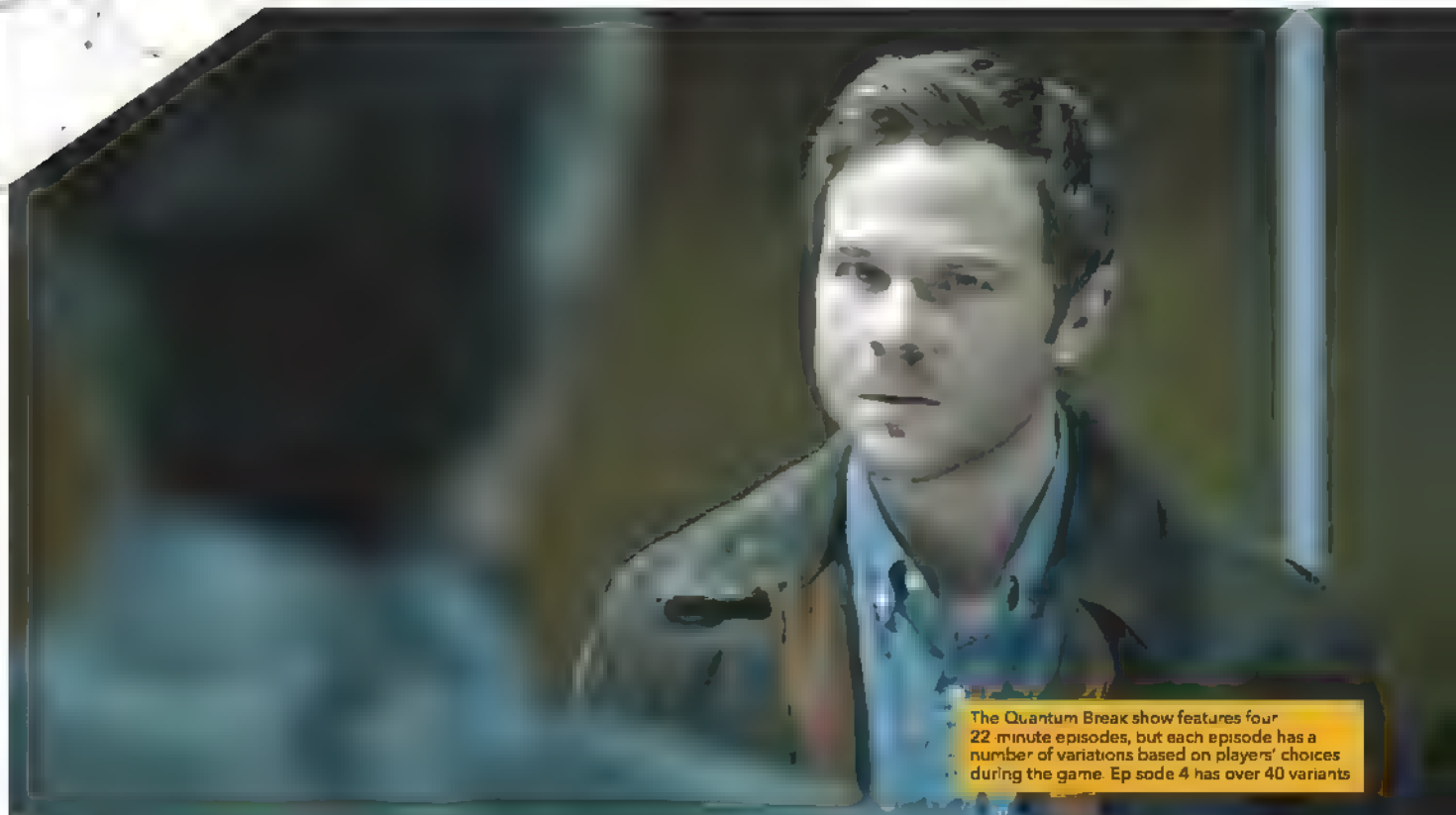
During a scene in the show's second episode, Paul talks with Jack about how his memory feels stretched. He has experienced many things during his 17 years bouncing back and forth through time. For years, he tried to right past wrongs, but he always came up short. Paul recounts a story about how Jack and Paul watched a man fall to his death when they were only 11. Paul says he journeyed back to that day and tried to stop the man from dying, but every instance ended the exact same way. Paul now believes that time is a closed loop; some events are destined to happen.

Scenes from the show, such as this one, add insight into Remedy's larger narrative, but Quantum Break's gameplay will also affect each episode of the show. The easy pitch is that the game focuses on Quantum Break's hero Jack, while the show focuses on the villain Paul, but good stories are rarely that segmented. Most of the game follows Jack's exploits as he tries to fight against Paul's ruthless behavior and works to prevent time from permanently freezing up. However, during certain moments in the game, players will take control of Paul, who has a special time-bending ability to see into the future. This allows Paul to make choices that will affect the overall narrative of Quantum Break.

Remedy calls these big choices "junction moments," and players will encounter a new one before each of Quantum Break's live-action shows. The live action is only four episodes long, but Remedy filmed several alternate scenes so each episode can play out differently depending on players' choices throughout the game.

For example, if Paul chooses to execute an eyewitness to Monarch's evil deeds then protesters will show up later in the game to rally against Monarch's questionable activities. On the other hand, if Paul blackmails that witness into silence instead, there won't be protesters, but Jack might have a scene where he interacts with the eyewitness.

The overall story for Quantum Break is fixed, so there is really only one ending in the game, but these choices color the narrative, and over the course of the game they will slowly add up. Remedy says that there are over 40 variations of the fourth and final episode.
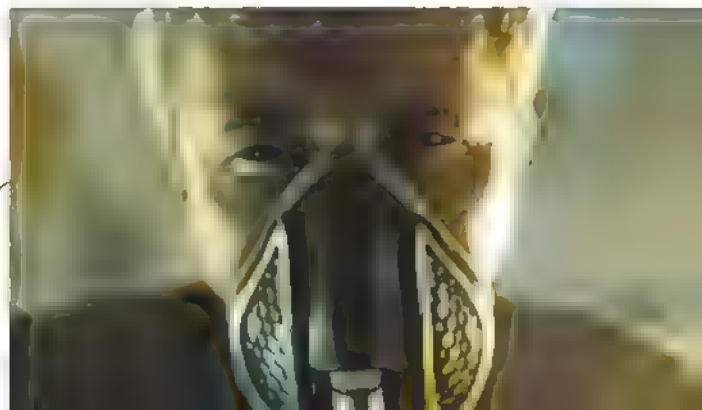
Like Max Payne and Alan Wake before it, Quantum Break's action is all about finding interesting ways to move through the environment, using your abilities to disarm opponents and eventually overpower them. During our hands-on time with the game, we were particularly struck by how much Quantum Break encourages players to keep moving. Jack's time powers make it easy for him to duck out of a danger zone, and each time he slows down time, enemies temporarily lose sight of him. This helps create several exciting cat-and-mouse moments where Jack is constantly being hunted, but continually jumps out of the shadows to blindside his enemies with devastating time powers.

Mikael Kasurinen had always planned on starting a career in big business, but his hobby got in the way. Whenever he had free time in the late '90s, Kasurinen loved creating mods for games like Doom and Max Payne. He was so good at modding, in fact, that Remedy took notice and offered him a job as a level designer on Max Payne 2. Kasurinen never looked back.

However, after nine years of working on Max Payne and Alan Wake, Kasurinen felt like it was time to move on. He took a job at Avalanche Studios, assisting with the early development of the Mad Max game. After that, he worked at DICE on Battlefield 4's single-player campaign. Kasurinen loved his experience working on games with large set-piece moments, but after shipping Battlefield 4 he began to long for designing the kinds of intimate, story-driven titles that he had worked on at Remedy.

"When I left Remedy, I really felt like I was leaving home," Kasurinen says. "So I was excited when, right after we shipped Battlefield 4, Sam got in touch with me. He asked if we could meet up, so I flew back to Helsinki. He showed me an early version of Quantum Break on a laptop in a coffee shop. The next time we met up I was working here."

The sequence Lake showed Kasurinen on his laptop was a vertical slice of the boat-crash level that Remedy would later demo at Gamescom 2014. The demo did a great job showcasing the team's time-manipulating story, but there were still several elements of Quantum Break's action that needed to be built out, and Kasurinen wanted to be the one to help build them.

"I think with Alan Wake, we were very focused on the story, and I think we had very solid gameplay, but at the end of the day there was not much variation," says Kasurinen, who is now Quantum Break's director. "Our goal now is to make it feel like there's a sense of progression and variety while telling the story."

Remedy wants all of the action in Quantum Break to flow naturally out of the story. To this end, the same failed experiment that gave Paul his time-manipulating powers also gave Jack powers. Jack hasn't been quantum leaping through time for 17 years, so he's still slowly learning the limits to his newfound abilities.

Jack's suite of powers includes a Time Stop bubble that creates a localized sphere of frozen time. Not only is this great for crowd control, it also allows Jack to fire off a series of bullets at a single enemy, which results in a massive explosion once the time bubble collapses and all the bullets collide at once. A Time Shield power creates a protective circle around Jack that slows and deflects bullets. Time Rush lets Jack run up to enemies and perform a devastating melee attack in the blink of an eye. Similarly, Time Dodge functions like a quick dash, allowing Jack to quickly move out of a hot zone. One new power, called Time Vision, even highlights enemies and other important objects within the environment. Each of these powers has its own cooldown timer, and can be upgraded using collectable chronon sources that Jack can find throughout his journey.

"Getting the different time powers in place was a really big deal," Kasurinen says. "One of our key goals with this game was making sure it wasn't a normal cover shooter – that players weren't just hiding behind crates shooting at stuff and throwing spells. We didn't want the game to become that. We wanted the player to feel empowered by these abilities. We try to describe what's happening with some pseudoscience, but at the end of the day, it's all for the purpose of having the best possible gameplay."

Players will need to make use of all of Jack's time powers, because in Quantum Break, time fights back. Throughout Jack's journey, he encounters a series of time stutters – moments where time has temporarily frozen. Thanks to his time powers, Jack is immune to these stutters and is free to explore the world while everything around him is frozen.

The team originally envisioned that these stutters would be great storytelling moments, and the mechanic seemed incredibly cool the first few times Remedy used it. However, it quickly grew boring, so the team was forced to iterate on the concept. They theorized that maybe time wasn't just stopping – maybe it was breaking. As time grows more and more unstable throughout Jack's journey, timelines become twisted and out of sync and objects begin to collide with each other. In these stutters time can also briefly rewind, creating a cycle of collisions that happen over and over again. Late in the game, time stutters become deadly obstacles that Jack must navigate using his time powers.

Collapsing boxes aren't the only thing standing in Jack's way. Monarch's security forces have developed experimental equipment allowing them to manipulate time as well. As Jack progresses closer and closer to the heart of Monarch Security, he starts encountering more enemies who can also warp through time, using many of his own tricks against him. While designing these enemies, Remedy looked at NASA astronauts and deep-sea divers to get a feel for the actual tools someone might use when swimming through time.

"Quantum Break's enemies are able to manipulate time, but not nearly as efficiently as Jack," Kasurinen says. "You can imagine that Jack is almost like a fish in the sea, so swimming through time is natural and organic for him. Everybody else doesn't have the powers he has, so they are like in a submarine. They're wearing these clunky mechanical things that barely work and they are able to survive in that place, but not with the same kind of efficiency or grace as Jack."

THE CHALLENGES OF FREEZING TIME

Quantum Break allows players to explore a frozen world, but creating those frozen moments isn't as easy as pressing pause on the action. A lot of subtle visual effects are needed to help communicate that time has halted.

"It's hard to convey that time is frozen," says game director Mikael Kasurinen. "If you think about it, the only way you can tell that time is flowing or not is through motion. One of our pillars is that there always needs to be motion on-screen, so that we can demonstrate time's effects when it grinds to a halt. When we build levels, we want to build motion through falling leaves or cloth flapping in the wind. That's part of what makes time stutters more powerful. When you can capture that stillness you feel the difference."

Unfortunately, pausing the effects doesn't always create the illusion of stillness that Remedy desires. Smoke, for example, is a tricky effect because a moving camera can create the illusion of billowing smoke even when the smoke is still. To deal with this, Remedy had to be extra detailed with its effects work to ensure that players didn't perceive movement during Quantum Break's frozen moments.

Remedy consulted with a scientist at Helsinki University, who helped flesh out the design of the studio's time machine
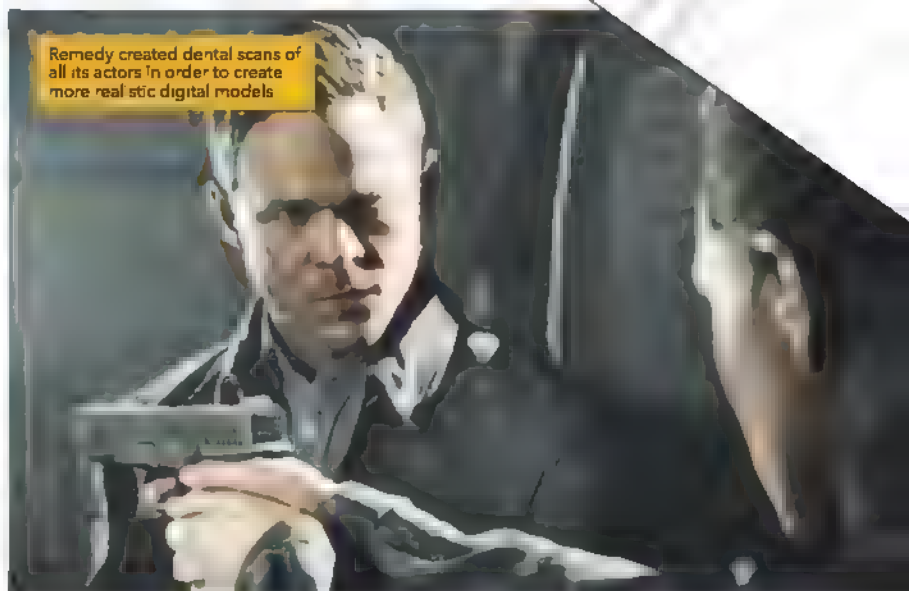
If Max Payne's action was all about bullet-time, and Alan Wake's action was all about disabling enemy shields with light before delivering the killing blow, then Quantum Break's action is an exploration on the manipulation of time. Jack's collection of new time powers makes him a more capable hero than any of Remedy's previous protagonists.

This past August, Remedy celebrated its 20th anniversary. The studio invited all the developers who had ever worked on its games to come into the studio to mark the occasion. The team decorated its lobby to look like the forest from Alan Wake and crafted a series of microbrews, such as a Max Payne IPA, which it served out of the bar on the studio's third floor.

Over these last two decades Remedy feels it has been defined as a studio that is constantly prototyping new ideas. Unfortunately, this means that Remedy's development cycles have also been longer than average. But Remedy is aware that it's slow. During the company party, when it toasted to another 20 years of game development, someone from the crowd shouted out, "and another three games!"

Remedy takes its time making games because it wants each title to feel special, and the extra development time often results in unique experiences and fresh ideas. Quantum Break is just the latest in that line of unique concepts.

But even a long development cycle eventually comes to an end, and with Quantum Break's April release fast approaching, the studio is suddenly running against the clock. Quantum Break is a bold project. Remedy has combined two different media to create a unique approach to storytelling while adding to its pedigree of cinematic action with a combat system full of time-manipulation tricks. The studio has already come a long way, but it still has work to do before release. Hopefully time is on their side. ◈

For video interviews with Sam Lake, a dive into the studio's vault, and to see new gameplay of Quantum Break, visit gameinformer.com/quantumbreak
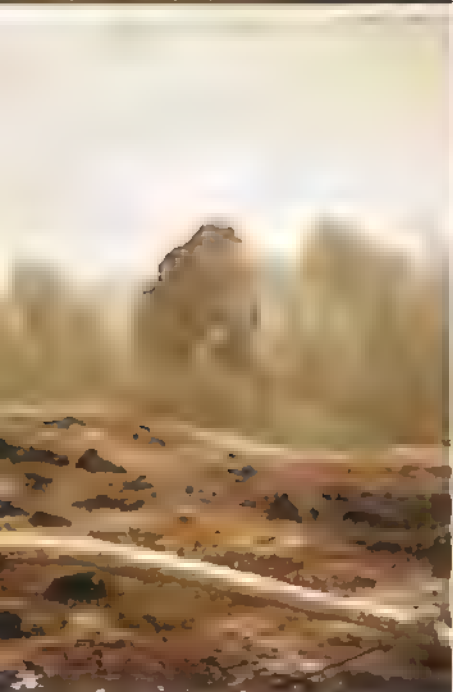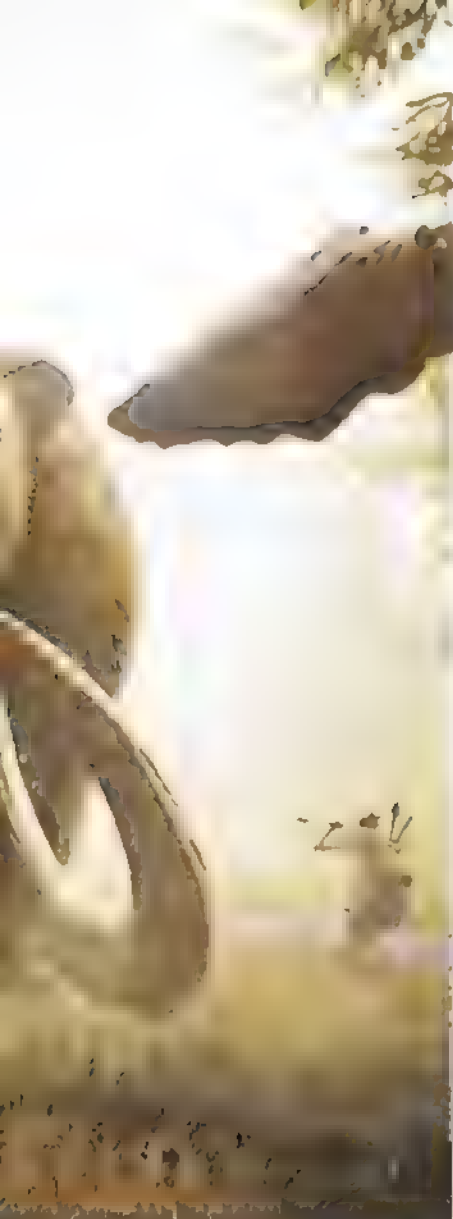
Far Cry Primal

From the gun age to the Stone Age

The first Far Cry games took place in the jungle, but now it's hard to predict the location of entries in the series. From Far Cry Blood Dragon's '80s atmosphere to Far Cry 4's Himalayan adventure, Ubisoft isn't afraid to take chances with the worlds players explore. But what happens to the series when guns are completely removed from the equation?

Ubisoft is exploring this territory in Far Cry Primal, a new standalone game that brings players to the Stone Age, a time when primate weapons like spears and bows were used to hunt and defend.

As a character named Takkar, the last surviving person in his tribe, players are thrown into an open world and must do everything they can to survive against rival tribes and aggressive wildlife like saber-toothed tigers, woolly mammoths, and other gigantic beasts that roam the lands. Ubisoft hasn't talked much about Far Cry Primal's story, but we know that one of Takkar's primary goals is to grow his tribe and become its leader.

In true Far Cry fashion, this challenge involves toppling enemy outposts in the land of Oros, a fictional area Ubisoft says is filled with "redwood forests, harsh taiga, and humid swamps." Hunting plays a large role in Takkar's development, another key component of the recent Far Cry games. Downed beasts can be transformed into weapons and tools. Your tribe must also learn how to successfully wield fire. In one gameplay clip we saw, Takkar uses a torch to navigate a dark forest overrun with a rival tribe intent on taking him down.

No matter what weapons you forge, mammoths are going to be hard to drop. Footage of one such battle shows Takkar and his tribe struggling to take down one of these gargantuan creatures. Arrows and spears only seem to anger the beast, sending it into a fury that knocks the tribesman flying into the air.

Far Cry Primal is a surprising direction for the series. We love seeing Ubisoft take chances in areas of human history that video games rarely explore, but it begs the question: Is it still Far Cry? We won't have long to wait to learn the answer considering the game launches early next year.

» **Andrew Reiner**

PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Montreal

February 23

Battleborn

Keeping hope alive

When Gearbox tackles a new franchise, it doesn't do anything by half-measures. Last-generation's Borderlands series revitalized how we think of shooters, blending solid RPG mechanics with enough loot to satisfy any Diablo nut.

Battleborn is equally ambitious, bringing some of Borderlands' best elements to bear in a recipe that defies simple definition. Gearbox's writing continues to be a highlight, with punchy one-liners, quirky characters, and masterful voice casting.

While the playable cast is largely overshadowed in the narrative by the non-playable characters who frame the missions, the diverse robots, soldiers, elves, demons, and other heroes all have style. One of the allures of the new trend toward character-based multiplayer games is it gives writers and designers more room to flesh out unique personalities.

We played a new story mission both cooperatively and solo, and it pitted us against a malicious A.I. with a Handsome Jack-style sense of humor. Instead of getting held up at checkpoints to fight off waves of enemies, we had a bit more control this time. Progressing through the linear level meant destroying large shards powering gates and force fields. Along the way, there were copious pick-ups to enhance health regeneration, speed, and shields.

While Battleborn comes from the same studio that gave us Borderlands, it doesn't have a cohesive feel yet. Hits on target don't yet offer strong feedback. This is extremely troublesome when playing a melee character. Knowing if you're connecting with your strikes is crucial when you don't have the benefit of a broad view of the battlefield and, instead, could find yourself up close and personal with the terrain while chasing an enemy.

The writing in the two stages we've played is sharp and voiced well, but it feels disconnected from the action on the battlefield. It's almost as if an audio track is playing over the action with little to no reference to what your team is doing. For instance, when playing solo, Kleese was yelling to trigger something for the third or fourth time while we were in the process of activating the item.
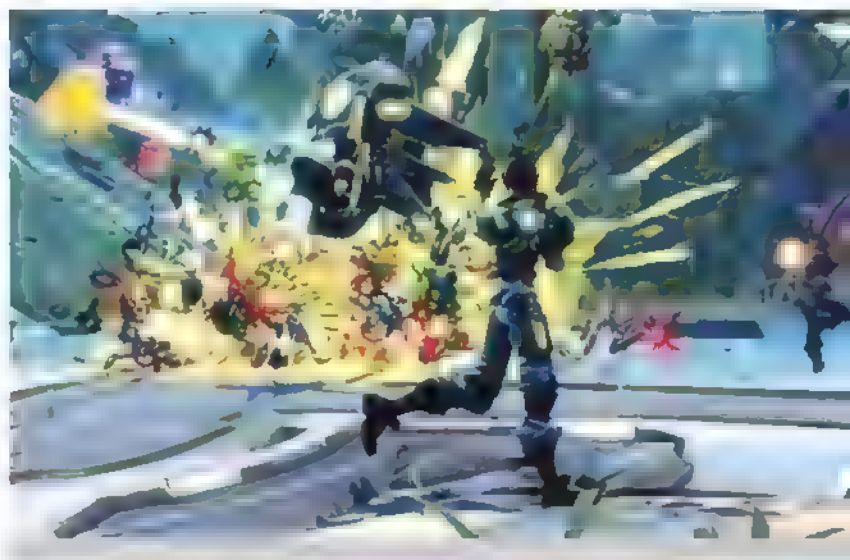
The best part of the mission comes during the multi-stage boss fight. In multiplayer, this was a satisfyingly strategic experience in which support players gave damage dealers breathing room to activate objects in the environment to progress the battle. While solo play is crucial for games, it doesn't have the same hook in this stage.

Going it alone robs you of a key distraction strategy. You can purchase drones in the environment, but the boss seems wise to the A.I. Borderlands was better with friends, and it appears that will be doubly true for Battleborn.

While we knew what to expect of the single-player going in, the multiplayer proved the larger disappointment. We had the chance to sample two modes. The first, Command, is a rote control point type with three capture zones. The second borrows from both tower defense and MOBAs.

Meltdown sends waves of minions from both sides toward sacrifice zones. Your job is to escort your robot troops and destroy opposing drones. Of course, you're going to meet the enemy team in the middle, which is where the fun is supposed to happen.

Unlike MOBAs, which require players to strategically use minions to chip away at extremely powerful turrets and then retreat, Battleborn's Meltdown mode is closer to a deathmatch with an added wrinkle. I suspect I would have had more fun playing this as a ranged character, but I wanted to sample a melee fighter for balance.

Gearbox needs to work on its close-combat characters. The sword combat currently feels muddy and aimless. Players need better communication (visually and aurally) when making contact with enemies, especially with special effects like blinding not having a signifier icon. This ultimately left me frustrated, even when successfully defeating A.I. and human opponents alike.

The good news is that there is still time for Gearbox to course correct. Battleborn has enormous potential. It just needs to start living up to it.

» **Michael Futter**

It's a good idea to keep your

Using her staff, Amber can dish out melee attacks or blow back foes to buy some breathing room

Just Cause 3

Creating chaos in an absurd sandbox

In many games, you must complete a lot of busywork before you can pull off huge explosions with overpowered weapons while escaping in sleek vehicles. Avalanche is trying to break that mold with Just Cause 3, giving players all the tools they need to create giggle-inducing chaos as soon as possible.

In a recent hands-on session, I was set loose in the wide-open sandbox world of Medici. While I wasn't given access to all the tools in Rico Rodriguez's toolbox, I did get a chance to sample a breadth of destructive gear.

Core tools like a highly maneuverable parachute, wing suit, and grappling hook are more than enough to get you started taking down the region's oppressive regime. Avalanche has implemented some smart tweaks since Just Cause 2, including allowing players to easily mantle from a grapple. This minor adjustment speeds traversal and allows players to spend more time plotting destruction than figuring out how to get to the top of a building.

Gas stations and bridges are now respawning structures, mostly because they are so much fun to destroy. Taking these down in tandem with an infinite supply of C4 or the multiple tether grappling hook feature creates huge, satisfying explosions. This is a key strategy when liberating towns and bases.

Using a tether to whip an exploding barrel into a radar tower and then send the debris into an enemy truck feels good. I had a smile on my face the entire time I played, tearing down broadcast towers, using my tether to attach one soldier's leg to another's head, and moving about the environment to stay ahead of the general's troops.

While the huge map offers players plenty to keep them busy, Just Cause 3 shines in its approach to unabashed fun. I spent 15 minutes playing with the tether system and marveling at the physics. This latest entry in the series is enhanced thanks to the work the mod community did on its predecessor, which amps up the absurd destruction.

As you complete challenges in the environment, you earn gears that fill up a mod bar. At different thresholds, more mods are unlocked and can be freely toggled depending on your play style. Some of these are routine, like reducing your cooldowns on vehicle drops. Others simply give you more creative options, like adding propulsion to C4, which allows you to turn cars and people into mobile explosive delivery systems.

For those who prefer to compete with friends, Just Cause 3 has leaderboards and call-outs to challenge them. You can load up their ghosts and see how they attained high scores on wingsuit, driving, and destruction challenges. The leaderboards are focused on your friends list rather than global rankings to give it a more intimate feel.

While I didn't play the final version, with the game so close to release, the demo gave me a great feel for what to expect. If my brief time with the game is any indication, it should be easy to get lost in Just Cause 3's huge, lush world. Whether that's completing missions and liberating the island, or just spending time flinging objects into space with your grappling hook is entirely up to you. » **Michael Futter**

PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

Square Enix

» **Developer**
Avalanche Studios

December 1

Helicopters are a great way to wreak havoc on Di Ravello's regime
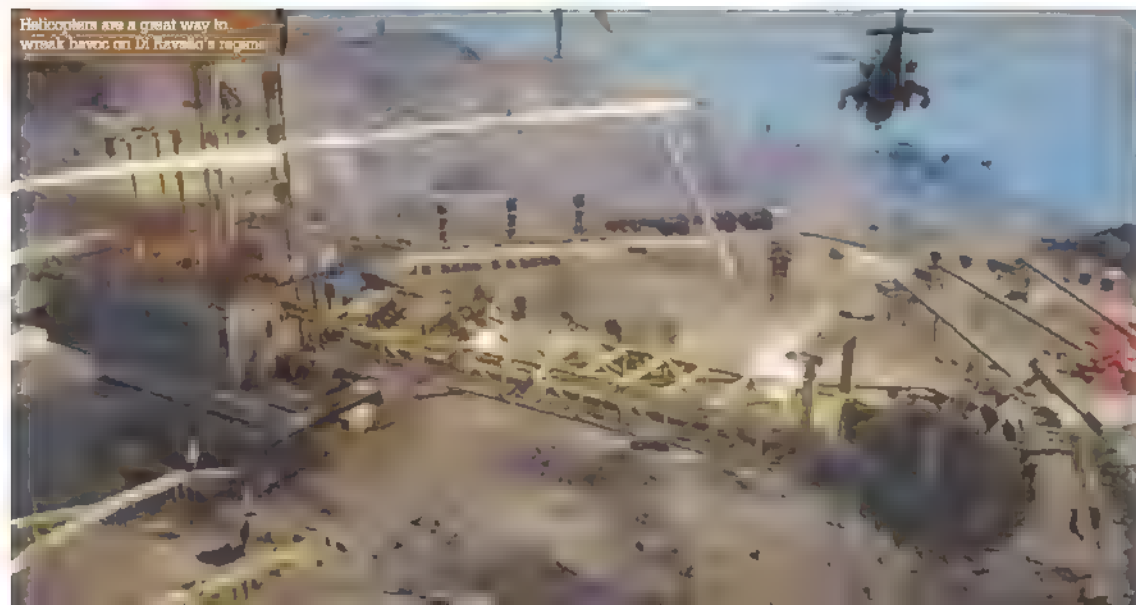
Deus Ex: Mankind Divided

In search of a more balanced future

Remote hacking isn't as effective, but it buys you some breathing room

Stealth continues to be a viable
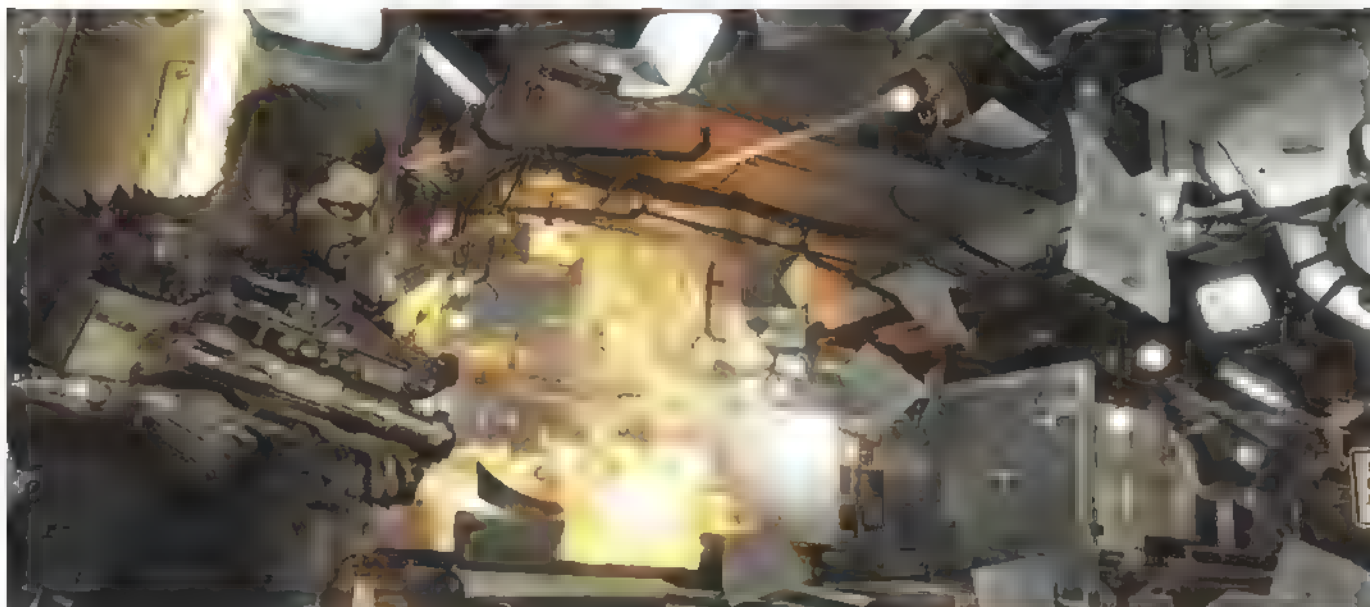
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Eidos Montreal

» **Release**
February 23

Many gaming franchises promise players big, meaningful choices. Deus Ex: Human Revolution was one of the more ambitious titles to attempt to fulfill this promise last generation. While it didn't always succeed, mainly due to balancing and out-of-place boss fights, Eidos Montreal has dedicated itself to improving on what worked and fixing what didn't with Deus Ex: Mankind Divided.

In a recent demo, we saw new areas that exemplify how the studio is working to better express the divergent stealth and combat paths for which the franchise is known. Human Revolution largely weighted gameplay toward stealth, and the team admits that combat wasn't as viable an option. To achieve better balance, the studio completely revamped the gunplay, with easier access to augmentation skills that enhance your execution. Creating custom loadouts on the fly that fit your style is easy. Once engaged with enemies, activating shields, arm-embedded guns, and other offensive augmentations is fluid. These components work together to give Adam Jensen more diverse options in open combat. This includes the Icarus Dash, which functions much like Dishonored's Blink, carrying him horizontally or vertically at high speeds.

Stealth has also received an upgrade. You can still switch into third-person view when taking cover, but it's easier to plot your way through an enemy-infested area thanks to more fluid movement. This gives you more strategic options when choosing where and how to move while staying hidden.

Regardless of whether you're a non-lethal player or prefer to leave a pile of bodies in your wake, Mankind Divided is much more generous with ammunition. You still need to manage your gear and your battery power, but the game should feel less restrictive.

Outside of engaging with enemies, Mankind Divided retains its RPG feel. The world has changed significantly in the two years since the events of Human Revolution. The golden age of augmentation is over. The divide between enhanced humans and those without mechanical upgrades has grown to the point of a "mechanical apartheid." This backdrop permeates Jensen's interactions with his task force teammates as well as those encountered in the course of investigating the conspiratorial plot.

Will you smooth talk your way through situations, stay in the shadows, or make your presence known with lethal force? How it all unfolds is, in part, up to you. ■ Michael Futter

Hitman

Returning to form

After experimenting with more narrative-focused design in Hitman: Absolution, IO Interactive is revisiting Agent 47's roots. While the studio isn't leaving everything from the most recent title behind, the next entry is designed to appeal to those that fell in love with Blood Money's sandbox-style play.

The new game, simply titled Hitman, puts players in huge environments with nothing but a target and a set of tools. How you gain access to your victim and execute your mission is entirely up to you. As is typical for the series, disguises are your way through a number of security checkpoints.

Subduing a maintenance worker, waiter, or security guard gets you further into the expansive sandboxes. You won't face the automatic suspicion found in Absolution, but these stolen outfits aren't license to roam freely either. Hitman adds "enforcers" to the mix who can see through specific disguises. Other characters, like the head of security and your target's elite bodyguards, won't be fooled by any costume. Taking cover and subduing enemies appears more fluid than past titles, and the minimap helps you plan your way through high-traffic areas.

A large part of the fun in Hitman games is coming up with creative ways to eliminate your target. To give players more opportunity to plan the perfect hit, far more NPCs have their own motivations. You can poke and prod them by affecting the environment, which has a ripple effect.
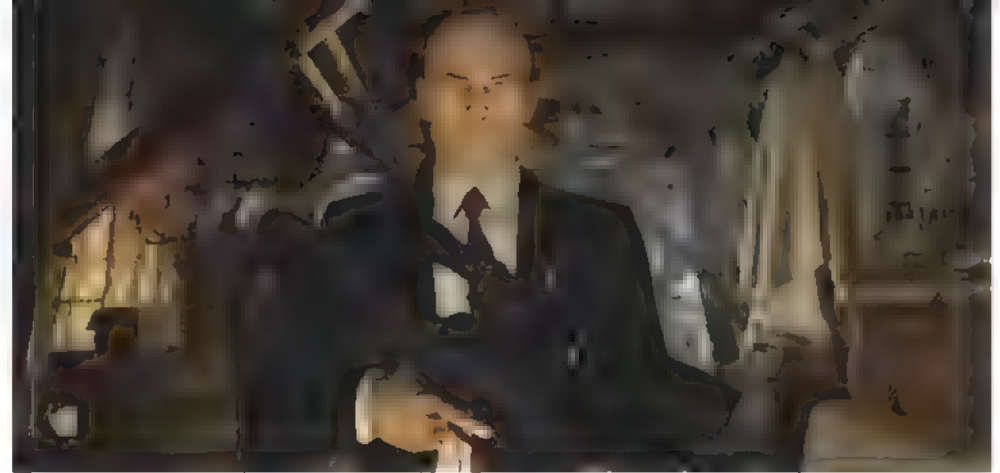
Because the environments are so large, there are more opportunities to create signature kills. You can drop a chandelier on your victim in the middle of a fashion show, loosen a mounted speaker so that it shakes loose while music plays, and employ all sorts of poisons and nasty surprises when you're nowhere near the victim.

Despite those stylish moments, IO Interactive is moving away from the bombastic, caricature style of Hitman: Absolution. That game featured larger-than-life characters that stretched believability for a series that has typically had a less-sensational focus.

Hitman takes place in a decidedly more authentic world. This is reflected in the design of the civilians milling about and the dialogue, but also the color palette. Absolution featured sharp contrasts and exaggerated hues. The environments and colors found in the new Hitman game are pulled more directly from the real world.

The result of all of these changes, both small and large, is that Hitman borrows from multiple past titles to create something new. Players are still encouraged to create intricate domino-like death scenarios, but are free to explore and plot in larger, open worlds. If all goes to plan, the result will be an ambitious playground for players to craft their own stories, whether in single-player or by creating Contracts for their friends to attempt.
» Michael Futter

Watch out for that first step, it's a doozy.

You can infiltrate in the iconic suit, but wouldn't you prefer a disguise?

Lego Marvel's Avengers

Marvel's broader cinematic universe gets time to shine

When we checked out Lego Marvel's Avengers at Gamescom, we were told that the spiritual sequel to Lego Marvel Superheroes was going to be much more than just the two Avengers films. We now know just how TT Games is building more of the Marvel cinematic universe into the upcoming title.

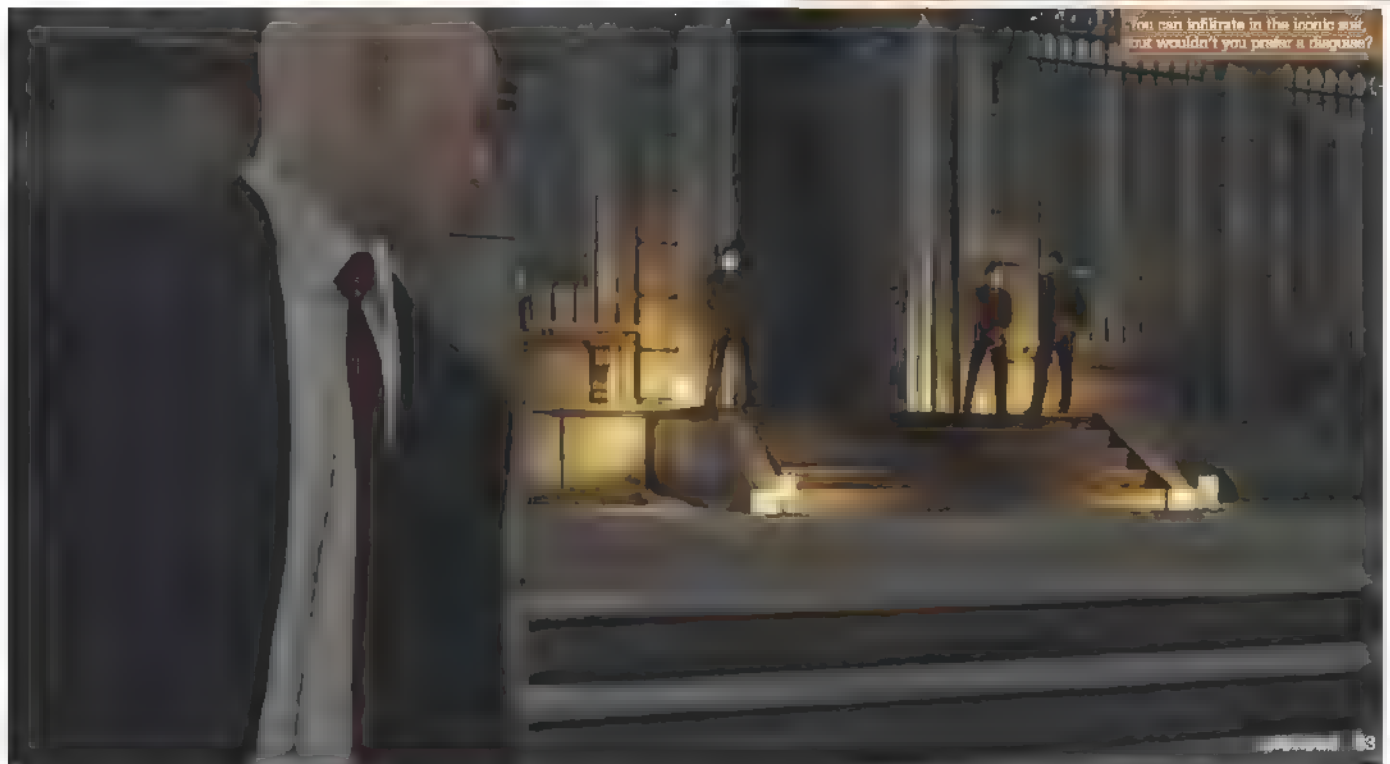Players begin with a shot-for-shot recreation of the *Avengers: Age of Ultron* opening, with the team assaulting a Hydra base. Earth's mightiest Heroes are attempting to recapture Loki's scepter from Baron Strucker, which puts them into conflict with Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch for the first time.

Once they retrieve the scepter, the scene shifts back to the events of the first Avengers film. This creates a more cohesive story for players that may not have seen the films. Along the way, you'll find shorter material from *Iron Man 3*, *Thor: The Dark World*, and both Captain America films (*The First Avenger* and *The Winter Soldier*). These are introduced with short cutscenes laid out like comic panels and narrated by a secondary character. For instance, the *Iron Man 3* scenes are introduced by Pepper Potts. The effect is like fast-forwarding to the exciting parts.

Throughout the game, players unlock eight different hub worlds. The largest of these is Manhattan, but players also travel to Hawkeye's family farm, Asgard, and South Africa.

Each area offers more to do, which makes them feel alive. For instance, Manhattan includes random crimes in which you can intervene. You also run into present-day Peggy Carter, who shares a story that transports you back in time to a monochrome version of Manhattan. Actress Haley Atwell, who plays Agent Carter in the Marvel cinematic universe, is on hand with new voiceovers.

Clark Gregg, who plays S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Phil Coulson, also recorded new dialogue for the game. No direct material is pulled from the two television shows or Netflix's current run of Marvel programming, though Expect to find enhanced versions of Daredevil, Jessica Jones, and Luke Cage.

TT Games says this game boasts an even larger roster of unique characters than its predecessor. Expect a number of variants of course, but those fans hoping for Fin Fang Foom, more Asgardians, and Devil Dinosaur are in luck. Even more obscure characters like Egghead and Gargoyle also make appearances, but all of them are connected to the Avengers in some way.

One of the things that TT Games impressed upon us is that the voicing from the films isn't a hindrance, but an opportunity. As an example, we were shown the scene in *Avengers* depicting Phil Coulson's death, which takes on a different tone when combined with the original dialogue. The large gun he used to blast Loki in the movie shoots out a spring-loaded boxing glove in the game. After he expires, Nick Fury puts a ticket to Tahiti on his lifeless Lego body (an inside joke fans of the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* television show will enjoy).

While it pulls from existing film content, TT Games is putting its own spin on things. The result so far is a Marvel Avengers package that still looks packed with the Lego games' signature humor and action. » **Michael Futter**

Plants Vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare 2

Let the sun shine... or blot it out

When PopCap first announced Plants Vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare, it wasn't entirely clear how well the franchise would make the leap from its tower defense roots to an online-focused shooter. The results were mixed, but the series' trademark humor was intact as sunflowers took down mad scientist zombies, and undead in football gear rushed right over peashooters.

With Garden Warfare 2, PopCap is fixing some of the fundamental mistakes made by the first game. First, all modes are playable offline. Previously, you could only take on the Garden Ops cooperative mode on the couch. Now, you can load up any of the multiplayer modes and practice against bots.

When you do go online, the new party and matchmaking systems have a more interactive feel. Instead of a menu-driven system, players are dropped into an ongoing battle with A.I. zombies on one of the two teams. Random events happen in this hub, with your base being invaded.

Your automated defenses can fend off regular assaults, but if you decide to get mixed up in the fight, things ramp up. As you tackle more foes, the enemies get tougher, culminating in boss battles. The Backyard Battleground hub is also where you can find a bounty board with daily quests, as well as environmental objects that serve as portals to online matchmaking.

One of the best bits of news out of our recent demo is that Garden Warfare players won't need to start from scratch to build up their stable of playable characters. Anything

you unlocked in the first title will be imported to the new game, regardless of platform. Simply connecting your console or PC to your EA account will give you all your goodies.

The game is launching with 14 classes, six of which are brand new (three on each side of the war). The zombie reinforcements include the undead pirate, Captain Deadbeard; the hero we deserve, Super Brainz; and the Imp, a soldier from the future. The plants are joined by Citron, a time-traveling bounty hunter that can spawn an energy shield; the powerful sorceress, Rose; and Kernal Corn, a cob with a pair of Gatling guns. In total, players can unlock more than 100 class variations through playing.

During our Graveyard Ops hands-on demo, we checked out the Imp. This tiny character has two guns that he can rapidly unload in a spinning attack and a gravity grenade that sucks in foes, holding them in place for a short period

of time. His marquee skill allows him to call in a Z-Mech robot that transforms the tiny, hovering Imp into a weapon of mass destruction.

After fighting off waves of smaller plants and fire-breathing bosses, the match culminates in a time-limited event. The final round tasks you with fighting through the flora to reach an extraction zone and hold out until a timer expires. The entire match was a blast, as the four of us worked strategically to protect our gravestone base and fend off the leafy horde.

Plants vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare 2 looks like it improves upon much of what held the first game back from greatness. The Backyard Battleground hub gives players something different to do while waiting for friends, and the party system allows players to stay together for extended play sessions. Hopefully this will continue to bloom on the road to release.

» **Michael Futter**

Rose turns zombies into goats. Poor Captain Deadbeard.

CONFRONT UNKNOWN LIFEFORMS.

Kingdom Hearts HD 2.8 Final Chapter Prologue

Catching you up and giving you a glimpse into Kingdom Hearts III

Square Enix recently announced Kingdom Hearts HD 2.8 Final Chapter Prologue. Long-winded name aside, it contains three key pieces. The meat of the collection is Dream Drop Distance HD, an enhanced console version of the 3DS release. Fans itching for fresh content should be satiated with a new episode, Kingdom Hearts 0.2 Birth by Sleep – A Fragmentary Passage, starring Birth By Sleep's Aqua. Additionally, this release continues the trend from previous collections of including an HD movie – Kingdom Hearts χ [chi] Back Cover – which sheds light on the Foretellers and the series' early history.

The collection gives fans some time to refamiliarize themselves with the storyline and piece together new revelations, but director Tetsuya Nomura also tells us that Birth by Sleep 0.2 incorporates elements from Kingdom Hearts III, essentially giving fans their first peek at the long-awaited project. "It's not necessarily for getting feedback, but more about letting people get a taste of Kingdom Hearts III through introducing a small part of the game system," Nomura says.

Birth By Sleep 0.2 is set to answer questions left lingering about keyblade-wielder Aqua and should only take a few hours to complete. "We're planning for it to be about the same volume of gameplay as one regular world,"

Nomura says. He also confirms that it focuses primarily on a solo Aqua, so don't expect many other beloved characters to make an appearance. Nomura is most excited for fans to get "a glimpse into what Kingdom Hearts III will feel like" since this episode was created using "a portion of the developing environment used for Kingdom Hearts III."

As for Dream Drop Distance, it is the only game that hasn't received the HD treatment yet, and Nomura wants to release it on a platform that fans will eventually play Kingdom Hearts III on. Since the game was originally created for a dual screen, it's taken more effort to release on one big screen, not allowing the team to add many

extras. "Because it's not a simple port, the processes involved seem almost like those when creating a remake," Nomura explains. "As such, we're not able to add in any brand-new elements, but there will be an element of a collection, just like in the previous HD Remix titles." As for how they're changing the gameplay for the PS4 version, Nomura isn't ready to reveal details yet.

Final Chapter Prologue doesn't have a release date in North America, but is slated for a 2016 release in Japan. After this release, fans should be refreshed on all the franchise's history before they finally dive into Kingdom Hearts III – the game they've been waiting nearly a decade to play ▪ **Kimberley Wallace**

Everything is better when Mickey joins the fight

Hard to believe we were introduced to Sora 13 years ago!

Underworld Ascendant

Pieces of the past get a futuristic makeover

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
Otherside Entertainment

» Developer
Otherside Entertainment

» Release
2016

The grand PC renaissance is in full swing, and thanks to a Kickstarter-fueled project, next year fans will be treated to a fresh take on Ultima Underworld. Paul Neurath, the original creator of the 1992 PC classic, is back to bring the franchise to a new generation of gamers. Players take the role of the Avatar in this sequel to Ultima Underworld and Ultima Underworld 2, where anything from the original titles is fair game. The new project also features some thematic crossover elements with Richard Garriot's Ultima spiritual successor, Shroud of the Avatar.

Players begin on traditional class-based role-playing paths: fighter, thief, and mage. Whether you start with a sword or stealth, your skills get stronger through use in the absence of a standard leveling system. Many encounters and situations can be handled in a variety of ways depending on your skill choices and path through the game.

The "think your way out of trouble" improvisational solutions in the original Underworld games served as the precursor to modern darlings like Deus Ex and BioShock. This philosophy is on display in our Ascendant demo, where a thief encounters a Shadow Demon. The unarmed player is no match for the light-fearing creature of darkness, but through creative use of the environment, illumination can be used to put the demon to rest – all without lifting a dagger or casting a spell.

Ascendant is all about writing your own story, and the user interface (or lack thereof) helps create that feeling. Players explore all manner of underground environments as they venture back into the Stygian Abyss, including towns, ancient temples, vast open plains, and mushroom forests. During the journey expect to reckon with a bristling bestiary of monsters using mind, might, or a combination of skills.

Players side with factions as they weave through an ever-shifting, highly curated story experience. Ascendant promises a fresh take on the systems that made the original Ultima Underworld a revered classic on the PC frontier, and it will be interesting to see how fundamentals that defined the gaming landscape of the day play out in the modern era. **» Daniel Tack**
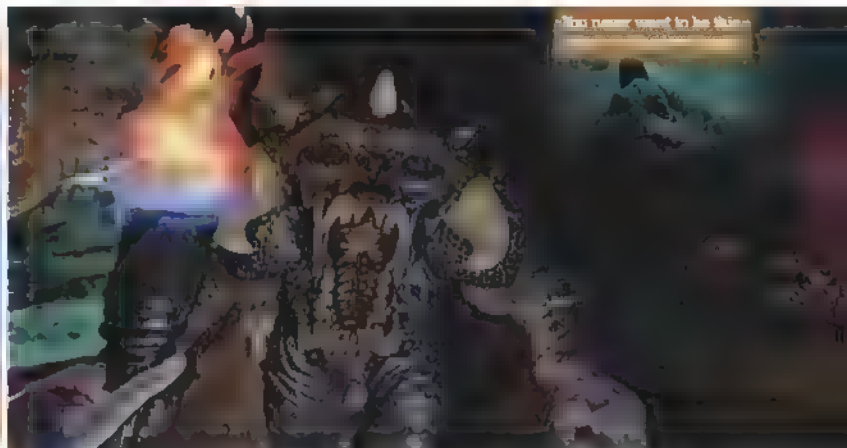
Unravel

Spinning a puzzling yarn

Out of all Electronic Arts' E3 announcements, Unravel caught us by surprise the most. When people think of EA, Battlefield, Need for Speed, and BioWare RPGs are what come to mind. With Unravel, the publisher is hoping to broaden its portfolio with smaller, high-quality games.

Unravel is under development at Coldwood, a small, Swedish studio of just 13 people. The game is a puzzle platformer featuring an adorable creature called Yarny, made of red yarn and wire "skeleton."

The charming character isn't just the thread that ties together the game's mechanics. The yarn represents the bond between people, with a subtle story of an old woman who has parted with her family. Throughout the game, you travel to a number of settings inspired by northern Scandinavia.

In our brief hands-on demo, we used Yarny's body to lasso and swing, built yarn bridges to fling us higher than we can jump, and sailed on a kite while dodging dangerous tree branches.

Progression requires that players find yarn balls to replace the thread trailing behind Yarny. This creates opportunities for deeper puzzle solving that also require the precision of traditional side-scrollers.

Not only are the pieces coming together well, but the art style and visuals are compelling. The juxtaposition of the fantastical Yarny against photorealistic backdrops works well. We still have much more of Unravel to see, and we're eager to do so after just a brief taste. » **Michael Futter**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Platforming

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Coldwood

» **Release**
Early 2016

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game:nformer
★ GAME OF THE MONTH
90 Undertale

What appears to be a simple retro-styled RPG turns out to be more than an old-school homage. Toby Fox's indie masterpiece Undertale has compelling characters, a brilliant soundtrack, an interesting combat system, and real choices that resonate far beyond a single play-through. Undertale will exceed your expectations and leave you with an experience that you won't forget.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	**5**	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	**4**	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	**3**	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	**2**	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of game needing this icon, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	**1**	In-game microtransactions

AWARDS

game:nformer **PLATINUM**		Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
game:nformer **GOLD**		Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
game:nformer **SILVER**		Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
game:nformer **GAME OF THE MONTH**		The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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Assassin's Creed Syndicate

Rebuilding the brotherhood

GOLD

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Quebec
Release October 23 (PS4, Xbox One), November 19 (PC) **Rating** M

The Assassin's Creed series has been running for eight years, and that kind of longevity doesn't happen without taking a few risks. To combat fatigue, each entry attempts to punctuate the familiar with new elements. Not all of these experiments pay off, but successful ideas might get folded into the core formula. Assassin's Creed Syndicate is the result of this process at its best; it removes outdated mechanics, refines the best concepts from other installments, and still makes its own contributions to the series' evolution. It can't be everything to every fan, but Syndicate is the most fun I've had with an Assassin's Creed title since Brotherhood.

For the first time since Ezio, I'd like to see the story of these heroes continue in future installments. Evie and Jacob Frye star as twin Assassins who attempt to retake London from the Templars in 1868. Using two protagonists works surprisingly well, since anything useful you gain as one sibling can be accessed by the other. Evie is the more likable of the pair; her measured demeanor and preference for stealth lines up better with my perception of an Assassin, especially compared to Jacob's more violent and impulse-driven philosophy. Despite their defined narrative roles, Jacob can still sneak and Evie can still fight, though their aptitudes are based on how you develop them.

Progression has improved significantly since Unity, borrowing from traditional RPGs in the ways you gain levels, craft gear, and spend skill points. Whether you're doing missions for the ridiculous parade of historical figures or conquering London (my

pursuit of choice), your activities result in a steady flow of money, materials, and experience, which you funnel back into your characters and gang. This satisfying gameplay loop surrounding your gradual ascent conveys a sense of growing power and influence, and ensures that no time you spend playing Syndicate is wasted.

My favorite missions are the main assassinations, which combine freeform infiltration with some guided set-piece moments to set up unique and gruesome kills. Of course, you can also blow it and complete the mission by starting a bloody brawl. Though your success in a fight is still dependent on your ability to counter incoming attacks and break guards, Syndicate lets you go on the offensive. The fast and responsive combat often has you taking down groups of three or more assailants and setting up multi-kill maneuvers, making the Fryes feel like the elite warriors they are (though the enemies' "one-at-a-time" approach to attacking doesn't help). Just be sure you don't wander into a high-level zone, since even a small disparity can spell big trouble for you.

Getting drawn into Syndicate's well-crafted version of London is easy, and you have a few new ways to get around. Horse-drawn carriages make the city feel like a Victorian Grand Theft Auto with clunky and uncooperative cars. The underwhelming carriages would be a bigger problem if not for another new form of transportation: the zipline. Like Batman's grapnel gun, this fantastic tool lets you climb buildings and cross gaps with ease, removing the need to shimmy around looking for windows, sills and ledges. It keeps traversal fun while

making it less fussy and tedious. After using the zipline to ascend Big Ben in seconds, I can't imagine going back.

Despite Syndicate's solid additions, franchise fans should notice plenty of other returning ideas in improved forms. Retaking the city piece-by-piece recalls the thrill of reclaiming Rome in Brotherhood. Crafting new equipment and upgrades borrows from Black Flag's system. Even Unity's Helix Rifts, which open playable sequences in different eras, have been adapted for one surprising section.

After Unity's troubled launch, you may be wary of Syndicate. I was too, but the major gameplay problems from Unity are gone. Syndicate isn't glitch-free, but its technical anomalies (A.I. issues, stalled objectives, long load times) are in the same tier that fans have seen since the series' inception. That doesn't make them less annoying, but outside of an occasional cutscene or checkpoint, they don't mar the experience significantly.

For all of the familiar parts of Syndicate, it still feels inventive. It may draw inspiration from previous installments, but features like the zipline and revamped progression system demonstrate a willingness to cut stagnant elements loose. With a cool setting, memorable characters, and a wealth of content, Syndicate has all of the hallmarks of a great Assassin's Creed entry – but it also surprised me by challenging what I previously thought a great entry should be. » **Joe Juba**

This review pertains to the PlayStation 4 version. The game is also available on Xbox One, and a PC release is scheduled for November 19

replay

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NBA 2K16

A thundering slam dunk

9

gameinformer **GOLD**

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Continue to push the boundaries of sports games with ambitious innovations in gameplay and modes

» **Graphics**
From the realistic player models to the first-class broadcast presentation, this is the best-looking sports game ever made

» **Sound**
The acting in MyCareer is dramatically improved, and newcomer Greg Anthony slides between commentators Kevin Harlan and Clark Kellogg without a hitch

» **Playability**
The already stellar gameplay gets better with new dedicated passing buttons and more size-ups

» **Entertainment**
With several modes worth playing, NBA 2K16 offers the most value you'll find in a sports game

» **Replay Value**
High

Letting a championship slip out of your grasp can be a harrowing experience for a franchise. Some teams never get over the hump, fading back into the pack never to emerge as a contender again. Others use the disappointment as motivation to improve and prepare for a second run. Visual Concepts found itself in this position after server woes sullied the launch of the otherwise impressive NBA 2K15. Using the offseason to retool, the series has emerged with its best effort in years.

NBA 2K16 is the virtual equivalent of a player who can play all five positions on the court. The already strong gameplay receives a boost this year from a redesigned post game that lets you back down players with a press of the left trigger, a welcome return to days of old. Passing also received an overhaul, giving you three face buttons for lobs, bounce passes, and the traditional toss. Having these options at your fingertips is great for specific situations, but expect to still use the icon-based passing because directional passing can occasionally misread your intent and send a ball across the court instead of into the post.

You will need all the tools at your disposal to keep up with the impressive A.I. in NBA 2K16, which is the best I've seen in a sports game to date. Each team employs different strategies, making every game feel different. This dynamic gameplay translates across NBA 2K16's strong collection of game modes.

For the last few years the destination mode for NBA 2K games has been MyCareer, which puts you in the shoes of an up-and-coming baller breaking into the NBA. This year 2K handed the storytelling duties to famed director Spike Lee. Player agency means little to Lee – no matter what race or creed you create for your MyPlayer, you play the role of "Frequency Vibrations," a high school hoops sensation born and raised in Harlem. I embraced this narrative direction since this is the story Lee wanted to tell, but the dissonance of seeing my pasty white player interacting with his black twin sister ultimately made me go recreate a different character so the cutscenes wouldn't be so jarring.

Though you get to pick which college "Freq" attends before getting to the NBA, the rest of the MyCareer infrastructure is stripped bare for the sake of telling a direct story. You don't earn VC to upgrade your character, get performance grades, or have access to social media interactions early on. Instead, you're in the passenger seat for a story about the trials and tribulations Freq faces as he transitions to a lifestyle of the rich and famous, where every decision he makes is scrutinized. The directorial vision and acting are both drastically improved over the last few MyCareer stories, but divorcing the story from the traditional My Career infrastructure ultimately fails.

Once Lee's tale comes to a close, the true MyCareer experience opens up and agency is restored to the player. Here you can earn experience to improve basic skills, unlock new animations, and purchase apparel. Visual Concepts redesigned the off-day activities to force players to choose between training with their team, making connections with NBA stars, and managing the various endorsement deals that require personal appearances at events. Balancing these elements for their advertised rewards makes off-days as compelling as the game days. The only major knock I have against this mode outside of divorcing the story from the game infrastructure is the obnoxiously low player rating at the start.

For the online suite, MyPark returns with the server stability the last two games sorely lacked at launch. More serious online ballers can try out the new 2K Pro-Am, which pits teams of five against each other. You can jump right into a pickup game, or create your own team (complete with customized logos, jerseys, and court). I generally had good luck connecting, though some have had problems getting into games.

As fun as these modes are, my favorite way to play NBA 2K16 is MyGM, which gives you say in all the organization's day-to-day operations. From tweaking ticket prices and building the roster to managing staff personalities and training regiments, this is the deepest franchise mode in sports games. The many systems at play rival those of dedicated sim games; you can even relocate your team to another city, build a new arena, and design new jerseys. Doing so will require patience; you need to earn resources from the team owner to fund the move, and you need 16 of the 30 team owners to back your relocation as well.

NBA 2K16 is the first true classic sports game of this console generation. I can only hope other sports games follow Visual Concepts' steadfast dedication to innovating on both the gameplay and game mode fronts.
» **Matt Bertz**
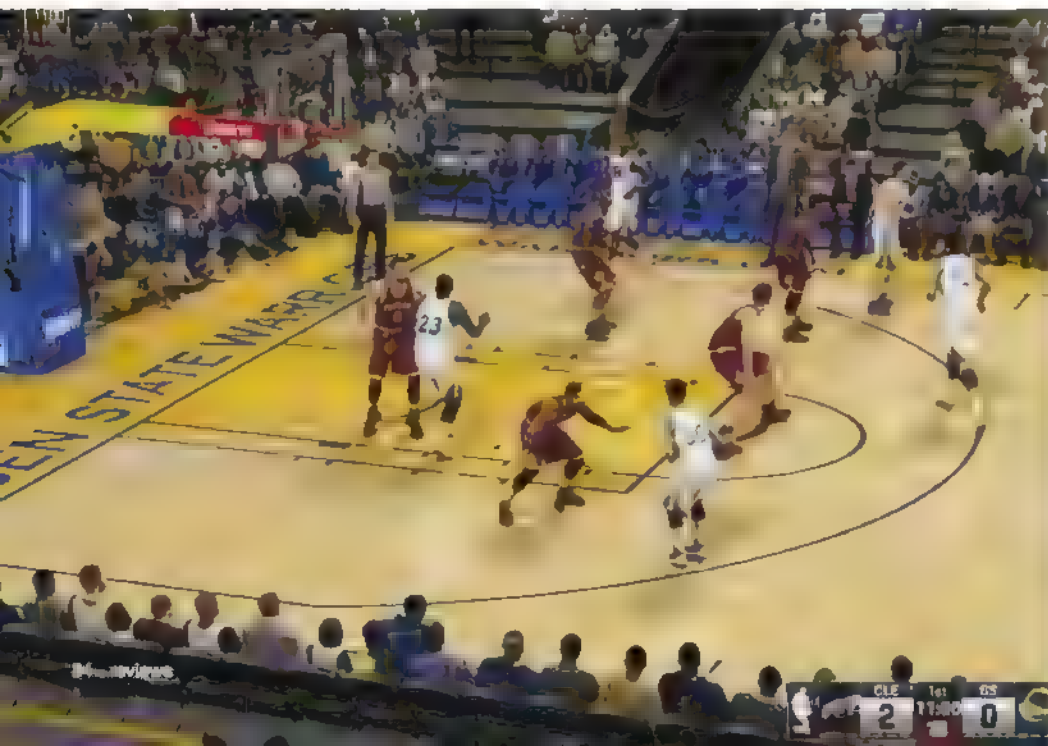
Minecraft: Story Mode – Episode 1: The Order Of The Stone

Crafting a charming beginning

Emerging from the bleakness of grim properties like Game of Thrones, Fables, and The Walking Dead, Telltale has teamed up with Mojang to create a bright, story-driven adventure. Removing the freedom that makes Minecraft so engrossing in favor of a restrictive story arc might seem counterintuitive, but the beginning hours of Minecraft: Story Mode generally work well. Though Telltale still relies on the same old tricks it has for most of its licensed series, the studio injects new life into its style with a humorous story set in the Minecraft universe.

Telltale had to navigate a minefield by pushing a tight narrative on a franchise that built its popularity on player-driven gameplay. With the original game having such a strong following, the studio could have played to the horde of hardcore players, leaving the uninitiated to scour Wiki pages to keep up with the references and inside jokes. Thankfully, Telltale strikes the right balance between giving nods to enthusiastic Minecraft fans and holding the hands of those who only have a basic understanding of the title. For each deep reference to playing Minecraft (like the disappointment of ending up with lapis lazuli instead of diamond), easy-to-follow moments explain basic elements of the world.

Meeting the cast of characters is a treat, since they're colorfully acted and likable. You control Jesse, voiced by either Patton Oswalt or Catherine Taber depending on which gender you choose. I preferred Oswalt's more cartoony approach that harkens back to his work in Ratatouille, but both actors do a great job of bringing Jesse to life. However, Jesse's pet pig Reuben steals nearly every scene he's in; his cute and charming disposition makes up for his lack of spoken dialogue.

Together with friends Axel, Olivia, Petra, and Lukas, Jesse embarks on an adventure to vanquish an evil beast that's destroying the world around it by uncovering the mysteries of the Order of the Stone, a legendary guild that once saved the world. The dialogue and story are well-written and deliver laughs throughout. One standout moment has you controlling Jesse in an over-the-top training montage. The sequence serves as a tutorial for how button prompts work, but it's delivered in such an enjoyable way that you won't even realize Telltale is readying you for the action sequences to come.

In The Order of the Stone, Telltale brings more action moments than any other first episode in its stable. These scenes tend to be more hands-on; you control Jesse's distance and sword swing when facing off against zombies, creepers, and spiders. In one scene, I encountered enemies that blasted me with fireballs. I had to time Jesse's swing to send the projectiles hurtling back at them like in the Ganondorf encounters in Ocarina of Time. While these scenes aren't nearly as involved or intense as typical action titles, they make me feel more like I'm a part of the action. I had more fun with them than I have with some of the hollow sequences from previous Telltale games.

Telltale worked with Mojang to make sure the experience feels authentic, and as a result Story Mode is at home in the Minecraft setting.

The instantly recognizable block graphics lend to the authenticity, but where Telltale drives it home is in the references to mechanics within Minecraft. Players use a crafting table to build things to progress through the story. Using actual recipes from Minecraft, you arrange materials to craft items that help you get out of jams.

Telltale's trademark dialogue choices return for Story Mode, but there are longer stretches between impactful choices when compared to previous games from the studio. In typical Telltale fashion, it's impossible to know how much these choices will affect the outcome of the story at this early stage, but I felt less conflicted in my decision making and was left wondering, "What if I chose that other option?" fewer times than I have in other Telltale properties.

Minecraft fans should enjoy the references to the game, while Telltale fans will enjoy the traditional storytelling elements they've come to expect from the studio. The Order of the Stone grabs your attention at a number of points and sets you down the path of actually caring about what's going on in a story set in the player-driven Minecraft universe.

» Brian Shea

8.25

PS4 • Xbox One • Wii U
PS3 • 360 • PC • Mac
Vita • iOS • Android

» Concept
Kick off an intriguing all-ages adventure that takes place in the Minecraft universe

» Graphics
The blocky graphics remain faithful to the source material and add to the overall authenticity despite a few minor visual glitches

» Sound
The cast of comedians and seasoned voice actors bring the writing to life in exciting and entertaining ways

» Playability
Though the impactful choices are fewer than typical Telltale titles, the action sequences are involved yet accessible

» Entertainment
A Telltale experience through and through, the first episode is enjoyable and whets your appetite just enough to leave you wanting more

» Replay Value
Moderate

Guitar Hero Live

Mixed results through innovation

7.5

PS4 • Xbox One
Wii U • PS3

» **Concept**
Reimagine the familiar mechanics and structure of music games

» **Graphics**
The live-action mode is goofy and thrilling, while the music-video mode offers something compelling for spectators to enjoy as you jam

» **Sound**
The song catalog is vast and varied, but skews toward younger and more modern acts over the classics

» **Playability**
A new guitar controller is great fun to learn, but it's less enjoyable to wrap your head around all the game's currencies and price structures

» **Entertainment**
An exciting new take on the genre hamstrung by a frustrating interaction model for getting and playing the songs you want

» **Replay Value**
High

In the suddenly reignited war of the music games, Guitar Hero Live is this year's wild card. A fundamental re-imagining of control, presentation, and progression adds up to an experience that feels novel, no matter your background with the series. Sadly, much of the gameplay is gated behind a labyrinth of currencies and purchases that ultimately pulls me out of the music and keeps me from playing the game the way that I want.

I love the new guitar and its stacked six button layout. This new setup, with two rows of three buttons, isn't fundamentally better than the familiar line of five buttons. Rather, it nails a different dynamic, in which your finger placement better evokes the sensation of playing real chords. The challenge ramp-up is steady, offering ideal entry points for beginners, while the highest difficulty is a genuine test of developing a new skill for expert players. Drop in/out local play for a second guitarist is ideal for parties, and the option for a third player to take up a microphone and sing along is nice. Returning players may miss the drum and bass options of previous entries, but a lot of content is here to make up for it.

Two separate modes offer distinct experiences. Live mode includes more than 40 songs, each acted out through a stage presentation by one of 10 fictitious bands. These live-action song performances are over-the-top, goofy, and a little bit

insane, and I love it. Whether intentionally or not, the earnestness of the roadie handing you your guitar, the clichéd bandmates, and the screaming and over-zealous crowd all add up to a wild experience that made me laugh out loud more than once. The craziness is accentuated by the two separate videos of each song – good performance and bad – that flip back and forth in response to your accuracy. The crowd that was cheering you along is suddenly despondent and hateful. The cute bassist who was giving you bedroom eyes a moment earlier is suddenly disgusted with your lackluster play. FreeStyle has even fleshed out the bands with backstories and press photos, which is the perfect finishing touch. Once played in their respective music festivals, the Live-mode songs are also yours to keep and play at your leisure, which is a huge saving grace considering the way the other mode is handled.

TV mode is a much more complicated beast. This online-only experience offers two streaming channels of music videos. When you drop into the song and start playing, your scoring is measured against nine other live players of related skill. Streaming channels are an interesting idea, but if the current programming is metal and indie tracks, and all you want is '80s rock, you're left frustrated.

Instead, you can opt out of the streaming channels and select tunes

from a catalog of 200 songs (different from the Live-mode songs) and their accompanying music videos or live performances. I adore the variety of music on offer, even if it skews toward younger and more modern acts. Premium shows offer an additional route into the music; complete the entry conditions, like three-starring several other songs, and you can check out several additional songs built around a particular theme. Many of those premium songs will enter the broader streaming catalog in the following weeks, leading to an ever-expanding song collection.

Unfortunately, this freeform song-catalog play comes with a major string attached. By playing anywhere in TV mode, you earn play tokens. Like popping quarters into a jukebox, you can spend these tokens to start any song one time. FreeStyle is generous with these tokens in the early hours, but if you mostly play your own choices in the song library, you'll eventually run dry.

Once they're gone, you can return to the two-choice streaming channels to earn more in-game coins to buy play tokens. But those coins are also how you purchase guitar upgrades (like a higher potential multiplier), cosmetic upgrades, and even uses of various hero powers. As such, you eventually face an infuriating decision between progression and the freedom to play the music you want. The other alternative is to use real money to buy hero cash, which in turn is used to buy additional play tokens. You can also buy a single 24-hour pass (currently priced at $5.99) for access to everything. There is no way to own any of the 200 songs in TV mode. The constant need to manage currencies is immersion-breaking, and you can't practice specific songs without spending a token. This structure is exploitative, which bums me out.

I like Guitar Hero Live; FreeStyle has crafted an innovative and intriguing variation on the standard music game formula. But as I played, I couldn't help feeling like my enjoyment was on a slowly burning fuse, and the inability to play my favorite songs was waiting to blow up my fun. » **Matt Miller**

We reviewed the PlayStation 4 version of Guitar Hero Live. The game is also available on Xbox One, Wii U, Xbox 360, and PlayStation 3, along with a separate version on iOS.
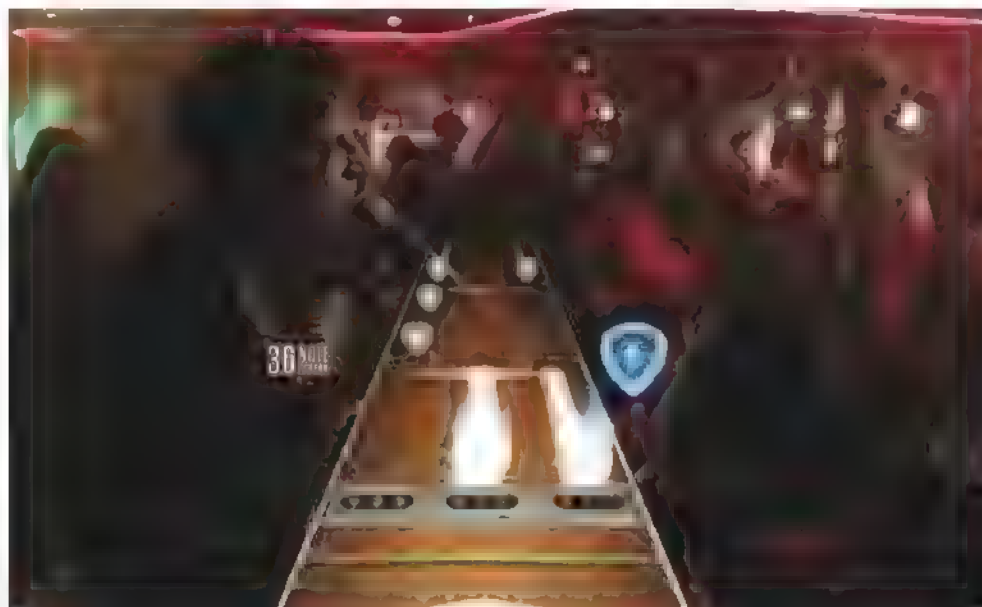
Transformers: Devastation

Platinum Games rolls out more stylish action

8

Transformers is a franchise with an impressive multitude of continuities. From the original '80s camp to the much-maligned Michael Bay moneymakers, so many versions of Transformers exist that only fans with access to Teletraan I's archives can keep them all straight. Platinum Games' newest parade of fistfights and fireworks seems targeted directly at gamers who grew up alongside these robots in disguise. However, Transformers: Devastation's bombastic combat also appeals to players who are just hungry for instant action.

Based on the Transformers Generations line of toys (which itself is inspired by the original *Transformers* TV series) Devastation opens as Megatron attempts to cyberform the planet, turning everything on Earth into metal. The story is unremarkable, but the voice cast was pulled directly from the '80s show. Combined with the striking cel-shaded visuals, the presentation helps Devastation feel like a cartoon come to life.

Players get to jump into the tires of five different Autobots: Optimus Prime, Bumblebee, Sideswipe, Wheeljack, and Grimlock. Each one performs differently. For example, Grimlock is slow and plodding but capable of wrestling giant Decepticons to the ground, while Sideswipe is a speed demon who unleashes a flurry of attacks. Combat isn't as deep as some of Platinum's previous titles, but it offers plenty of ways for you to dismantle the oncoming hordes of Decepticons. A well-timed dodge even slows time for a few seconds (à la Bayonetta's Witch Time), allowing you to sneak in a few extra hits. When you successfully complete a combo chain, you're rewarded with the chance to perform one final flourish that usually has your Autobot transforming into its vehicle form before slamming into the enemy.

Every Autobot has unique style and combo variations, and they're all fun. I favored Sideswipe and Wheeljack thanks to their speed, but I also had a lot of fun zipping around behind enemies as Bumblebee and performing devastating area attacks with Optimus Prime's trailer. Enemies do a good job encouraging you to mix up your tactics since some have shields that require charged attacks to disable. Other enemies fly through the air, forcing you to pull out your guns to ground them before closing in for a more powerful melee combo. In true Platinum Games form, Transformers: Devastation is a challenging experience, but each fight is full of rewarding moments.

Between bouts, Platinum Games does a remarkable job of shaking up the gameplay with a few one-off action sequences. For example, one mission has you racing out of a cyber facility while the floor beneath you crumbles. Another sequence asks you to carry a cube of red energon across the city while dodging a stream of angry Decepticons. One particularly memorable highway chase is even reminiscent of a 2D side-scrolling shooter. Not all of these sequences are winners, but many of them are fun diversions and break up the formula well.

Throughout all this action, your Autobots collect loot from fallen enemies and storage pods. The variety isn't great, so you end up with a lot of interpretations on only a handful of useful guns. Thankfully, you can break down lower-level gear and use it to level up your favorite weapons. Overall, the loot system feels shallow, but the pull to destroy every object in an environment and collect every scrap of gear remains strong.

Platinum Games has been an inconsistent developer. The studio has delivered a number of high-octane action games, but then it releases lackluster licensed products like The Legend of Korra. Going into Transformers: Devastation, I wasn't sure which side of Platinum I was dealing with. Thankfully, Devastation's polished combat, gameplay variety, and affection for the classic brand make it a game that the studio can take pride in.

» **Ben Reeves**

PS4 • Xbox One

» **Concept**
A stylish action game in the vein of Bayonetta and Devil May Cry set in the Transformers: Generations universe

» **Graphics**
The fantastic art design is a nod to the classic '80s show, but it sometimes lacks the crispness of high definition

» **Sound**
Close your eyes and you might think you're watching the cartoon thanks to the classic voice cast and excessive electric-guitar riffs

» **Playability**
These controls are tight and the action is polished, but the difficulty is nothing to sneer at

» **Entertainment**
A series of flamboyant action sequences and a proven combat formula make this a solid choice for action fans

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

6.5

PS4 • PS3

» **Concept**
Go back to the series' roots with a more traditional setting and reinvent the fun action-battle system

» **Graphics**
Even with improvements to detail and lighting, the graphics feel dated and unnatural

» **Sound**
A solid soundtrack and capable voice performances enhance the experience

» **Playability**
This game is more complex than past entries. While the extra depth is a welcome change, this entry isn't as accessible due to archaic elements like save points and constant backtracking

» **Entertainment**
Tales of Zestiria has some good ideas, but the experience is underwhelming and disappointing

» **Replay Value**
Low

Tales Of Zestiria

Losing passion and inspiration

The Tales franchise has seen its ups and downs through the years, but Tales of Zestiria is the most disappointing entry in the long-running series since 2006's Tales of Legendia. Zestiria has flickers of greatness, such as a cool battle system and a more mature story, but they're wasted on frustrating, inexcusable gameplay mechanics. To put it bluntly, this entry feels dated. It makes you suffer through backtracking, long-winded battles, and boring dialogue.

Zestiria is supposed to be a return to form, finally taking the series back to a medieval setting. The change makes it feel different than Xilla's futuristic focus, having references to the King Arthur legend and battles with monsters right out of Greek mythology. I liked this shift, as it made me look forward to who or what would show up next in the story.

The overall plot has some interesting twists, but ultimately comes off more predictable and hackneyed than exciting. You play as Sorey, a human raised by seraphim, who must unite the human and spirit worlds to prevent catastrophe. Aside from assassin Rose and outlaw Dezel's intriguing partnership, the characters are vanilla, rarely saying anything compelling. At least the ensemble isn't as annoying as previous exuberant casts. The clichéd writing, which the series has struggled with, is also toned down.

Zestiria takes the fun action-battle system in new directions thanks to a focus on elemental attacks. As in past entries, four characters can take the battlefield at once, but since Sorey has formed pacts with four different seraphim tied to the basic elements (fire, water, earth, wind), they can help in battle in interesting ways. Seraphim can either fight as regular party members using their elemental magic or merge with human characters to combine HP and unleash powerful combos. This adds variety to battle, giving you more options for your strategy. On one hand, maximizing your combos are key to increasing your damage. On the other hand, if Sorey ever gets close to death, you can transform with a seraph and get a nice HP boost and restore health. Battles are about using the two different forms intelligently and ensuring you take advantage of elemental weaknesses. Even in Sorey's human form, his different arte types can cancel out an enemy's attack, forcing you to constantly pay attention on the battlefield.

I loved this new wrinkle to the battle system, but it has drawbacks. Movement feels restricted, and regular battles aren't fast-paced. Bosses often have huge health bars and the encounters feel more like you're just chipping away at them rather than having an exciting conflict. Fights are especially long if you can't maintain a rhythm for combos with your party members. Your A.I. cohorts aren't awful, but you can't strategize with them except for a few simple commands. I recommend setting strategies for each character as soon as possible. Although, being in the same room with someone makes synching your attacks up much easier, so co-op is an even better choice.

The longer encounters take a greater toll due to the terrible dungeons full of annoying busywork. In these uncreative backdrops, you backtrack often and some have ridiculous demands. One dungeon has hidden eyes in the walls, and if you don't use a protective bubble at the right time, you're transported back to the beginning. How's that for an obnoxious time sink? Some dungeons offer little direction, forcing you to pick up on cryptic clues, like hidden markings. Also, be prepared for plenty of tedious switch puzzles.

To add insult to injury, at times your objective is unclear. Zestiria (like Xilia) puts a star on the map guiding you to your next location, but not for everything. Sometimes you're merely given vague clues on how to move forward. This doesn't even factor in the frustration that you must pay using the in-game currency to fast travel, and that you can't save everywhere.

Tales of Zestiria feels like a game from another time, and not in the charming way. It forces you through some the most boring and outdated elements from RPGs of yesteryear. If the series wants to stay relevant, it needs to put forth a better effort than Zestiria. ■ **Kimberley Wallace**

Halo 5: Guardians

Reshaping an icon

8.75

343 Industries walks a tightrope with Halo 5 between an established framework and desired innovation, focusing on speed and mobility, a story that takes characters off their established courses, and a multiplayer mode that veers dramatically from expectation. The balancing act is not without stumbles, but even when things feel a little off, Guardians is still fresh and surprising.

Halo 5's gameplay is all about motion and speed. New mantling, slamming, and dashing maneuvers make your Spartan feel like a superhero, flitting about the battlefield in a flurry of action. That sense of maneuverability shines on Normal and Heroic difficulties, and the inclusion of distinct A.I. teammates layers in an additional level of joyful chaos. Legendary difficulty doesn't feel quite right, however. The sense of speed is neutered (since turtling up is often the only option), your allies make bad decisions about revives, and checkpoint placement is archaic. The absence of large gun magazines on lower difficulties leads to constant change-ups and a breathless pace, but the low ammo on Legendary is frustrating.

Cooperative online play is a blast, especially because of some excellent challenge scaling based on number of players. However, I am disappointed by the absence of local co-op, which has long been my preferred playstyle.

For the first time, Halo is fully embracing the broader fiction established in other mediums, drawing in characters and concepts of greater complexity. As a result, the universe feels more nuanced, even if some less-devoted players may get lost in the jargon. Beautiful cutscenes lend a cinematic vibe to the adventure, which sees Master Chief chasing the one thing that can turn him away from duty, and a new generation of Spartans ordered to bring him back.

Along the way, the franchise maintains its reputation for varied settings and explosive situations. Snow-blanketed cliffs under bombardment give way to tank battles on a glassed colony planet and mysterious ancient alien ruins on the homeworld of the Elites. The bombastic window dressing hides a simple plot that recalls the cliffhanger quality of Halo 2; this is far from a standalone tale. I love the broader cast of characters, and the

way their personalities play against one another. The constant banter between teammates enlivens the narrative, as do hidden audio logs, which double as secrets to track down.

Competitive Arena play harkens back to the best of previous entries, albeit with an increased focus on precision and speed. The game modes offer something for everyone, from classic Slayer and CTF matches to specialty fights like elimination-style Breakout or twitch-based SWAT. After an initial batch of randomized skill-check matches, the matchmaking is excellent, with dedicated tiers that govern who you're up against. With a tight radar radius, 15 complex maps, and a focus on headshots, Halo 5 rewards high-skill players at the expense of a more beginner-friendly experience.

I have mixed feelings about Halo 5's other competitive mode. Warzone draws inspiration from MOBAs and Battlefield to take shape as a large-team battle for 24 players. It combines capturing of bases with points garnered for A.I. alien kills. The concept often delivers impressive skirmishes, and the well-designed maps provide strategic sophistication. However, the majority of the matches I played ended in landslide victories or losses, where early leads were often highly predictive of a win. I'm also frustrated by score distribution on A.I. kills; only the final kill shot scores for your team, making it far too easy to steal points. Long respawn

runs keep you out of the action for too long, and you can't spawn on teammates. The game also does a poor job of explaining the mode and its scoring, leading to confusing early matches.

Warzone's issues are accentuated by requisitions, a progression system that provides random, one-use items that can turn the tide of a fight, like a tank or fuel-rod cannon. Requisition packs can be earned in-game, but also purchased with real money. As such, those who pour in a lot of cash have the potential to more frequently pull out the big guns late in each Warzone match to save the day. Even disregarding the microtransactions, I don't like having to juggle my own inventory of supplies during every match, and the random nature of requisition drops often prevents one from playing with their favorite toys. At the same time, I enjoy the regular flow of cosmetic customization unlocks, which are plentiful and visually striking.

If the last major installment represented 343 taking possession of the Halo house, this new installment shows it is ready to move the furniture around and make it their own. Some aspects of the game feel different than what longtime players have come to expect, but I'm happy to see a willingness to innovate. Despite some missteps, Halo 5 is an easy recommendation for the predominant moments during which the game shines. » **Matt Miller**

Undertale

An enchanting, exhilarating journey

9.5

PC

» **Concept**
A classic find-your-way home RPG introduction spirals into a unique journey of twists and discoveries

» **Graphics**
Retro and threadbare, the visuals successfully deliver the charm of each character and setting

» **Sound**
While the sound effects are basic, the score is inspiring and fits each encounter immaculately

» **Playability**
Undertale can be played easily as a traditional RPG, but has plenty waiting below the surface for those who seek it

» **Entertainment**
Compelling characters and music come together with an eclectic and clever combat system. Undertale is an intensely curated experience worthy of your attention.

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

At first glance, Undertale is a retro RPG that feels similar to the seminal classic Earthbound – but it's so much more than that. It is the culmination of many meticulously crafted moving parts that come together to create something magical. The music, dialogue, characters, and combat system make every encounter unique; after finishing the game, I wished I could experience it again for the first time.

Undertale's retro look doesn't do it any favors in terms of eye candy, but the strong characters and interesting mechanics bring the action to life. The less you know about the specifics, the better. Just be aware that the opening hours are the driest and most traditional, setting up what appears to be a classic journey-to-home RPG story. You don't need to be an RPG connoisseur to enjoy Undertale, but a love of classic SNES-era JRPGs may enhance your time with the title

The combat is incredibly nuanced. Manipulating a heart's movement in the little bullet-hell box to dodge incoming attacks appears rudimentary, but it's the crux of Undertale's unending wonder. By constantly breaking the rules of the box in every encounter, every fight has its own special signature – whether you're struggling to climb a spiderweb or dodging and blocking spears. Boss battles are the centerpieces of this approach, with varied attacks and rule-breaking happening at every turn. A fight could alter your combat command functionality, expand the minigame box across multiple screens, transform into a platforming challenge, create color-based rules, or take things outside the box completely. I was frequently staring in awe during some of the shifting encounters, saying "that's so cool" to myself. Undertale isn't afraid to break the fourth wall, and while other games may do this in a humorous fashion, it's directly tied to gameplay elements here, and astonishing when it does so. This doesn't have an airy, pretentious vibe. It's clever in a way that matches up perfectly with each adversary.

You don't have to battle everything you encounter, but you're always interacting with the 2D shooter minigame. Undertale gives the player the choice of how to deal with each fight. You can use an array of weapons and armor to battle directly as you would in a standard RPG, or you can dive into probing the monster's likes and dislikes to find a solution. You can even devise your own ways to break the rules entirely. Every fight has a non-violent solution, and following this path means you never improve your base stats – but you make more friends. You see echoes of each of these choices hours later, culminating in a variety of endings and special areas that can only be accessed by making specific choices (including the most difficult, exciting bullet-hell encounter in the game).

Undertale took me about six hours to complete my first playthrough, but every one of those hours is special, and I immediately dove back in to explore some of the additional content. Undertale may not be the prettiest game at the ball, but it is a fantastic, unique take on a classic genre that defies all expectations

» Daniel Tack
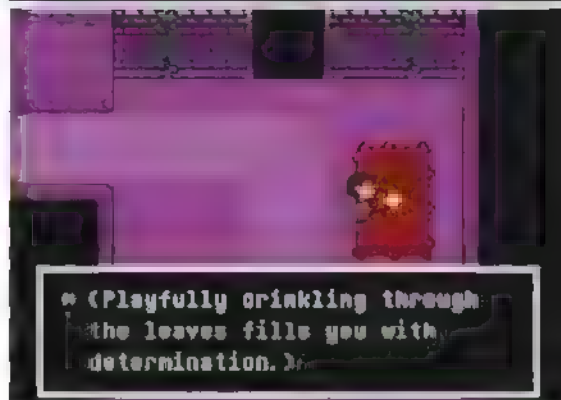
Civilization: Beyond Earth – Rising Tide

A bright future for humanity

GOLD

9

PC

The game is winding down on turn 350, with your aquatic blockade sealing off the rest of the world from your carefully protected victory wonder, a ticking clock on your opponents. Though they realize what's happening, it's too late – your diplomatic alliances and the related agreements have fueled an economic, cultural, and scientific powerhouse that only now brings its military power to bear at the zero hour to protect the ultimate victory condition. Unique units that would normally break the bank ripple out of each of your holdings, fueled by potent trade networks and masterfully planned territory borders created by your shifting sea colonies. This game may be over, but you're already looking forward to the next one.

Rising Tide adds a good deal of complexity and options to Civilization: Beyond Earth, which was needed. The base game is excellent, but as a longtime fan of the franchise, I was looking for more routes to victory and a deeper system of interaction with my opponents. Rising Tide answers this challenge admirably by adding the ability to build on the sea, which goes far beyond just using water tiles like landborne resources. Sea colonies have their own special buildings, units, wonders, and mechanics. They also expand differently than their land counterparts, via constant resource expenditure to move the colony from tile to tile. This allows the player to form a perfect zone of control, creating chokepoints and safety nets, with large sea-colony leviathans capable of swallowing up massive chunks of map and making movement difficult for rival factions.

The affinity system now also gives hybrid players real options and some awesome units/upgrades that let you specialize in powerful aggression or massive support with dangerous, hard-hitting mechs and morphing alien monsters, so you won't feel forced into a single path. You may even want to dive into these offshoots if you're working on a more traditional, pure-affinity strategy.

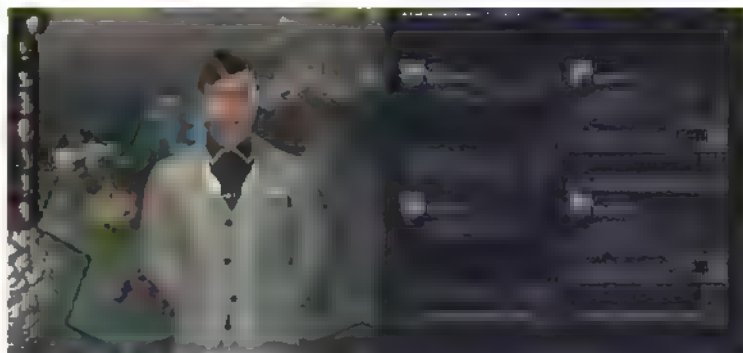While the new seafaring options are excellent, the real gem of Rising Tide is the revamped diplomacy system and the new associated diplomatic currency. This currency can be used to buy units and upgrades directly, but a far more compelling

option is using it to develop your faction's core passive trait, pick up new passive traits, and fuel powerful alliances and agreements that can be the difference between victory and defeat. These bonuses stack up in powerful ways, and a savvy diplomat has the world at their fingertips as they engage with the other factions. You still won't be talking down Lincoln or Gandhi, but the other factions now all have various personalities that you can play to for added benefit. You also receive constant feedback about what other factions think of you based on your actions, whether they are upset with your expansion or loving your culturally enriched attitude toward development. These relationships, balanced by fear and respect, lead to enhanced alliances – or war. Firaxis did right here, as the diplomacy system opens a ton of new doors while making you feel like you're part of the game, not just plodding along toward your

preferred victory method.

Firaxis also added a new artifact system – a mechanic that makes every game feel unique even if you always play the same way. While it's not nearly as pervasive as the new sea-building or diplomacy options, it's a cool feature that lets you find various objects and cash them in for significant one-time currency bonuses. I usually pass on the instant gratification and save up a nice little collection, because artifacts can also be turned in as sets of three to create special buildings and unique perks, allowing your varying finds each game to present different bonuses and maybe even alter the course of your civilization.

Rising Tide is an overhauled look at the core experience, and it would be difficult to go back to Beyond Earth without the myriad enhancements the expansion offers. As with Civilization V before it, Beyond Earth looks like it's becoming all it can be with these upgrades. » **Daniel Tack**

» **Concept**
Add complexity and depth to the title with new units, sea colonies, and completely reworked diplomacy mechanics

» **Graphics**
Not awe-inspiring in the slightest, but they do a nice job of conveying the ever-changing tile world

» **Sound**
The soundtrack provides players with serene background noise to handle the never-ending turn cycle

» **Playability**
New mechanics and advanced strategies add a good deal of moving parts to consider. While hungry franchise fans have been waiting for them, they may provide challenges for newcomers. A handy optional advisor is there if you need it

» **Entertainment**
A definite step in the right direction, as added complexity and variation from game to game complement a radically redesigned diplomacy system

» **Replay Value**
High
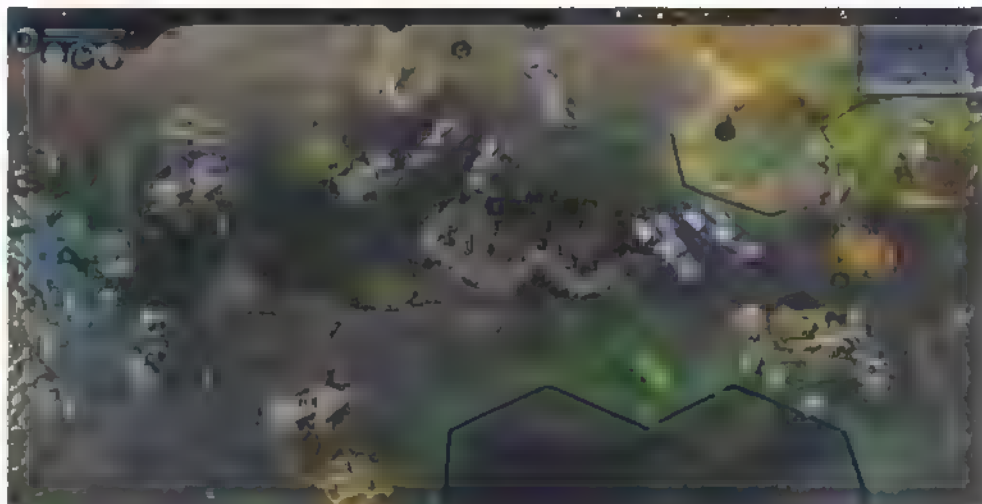
» **Concept**
Deliver a new Yoshi's Island for modern consoles with cooperative play all wrapped in an adorable yarn aesthetic

» **Graphics**
It is tough not to be charmed by Woolly World's yarn universe

» **Sound**
The music is pleasant, but rarely rises to Nintendo's typical level of unforgettable tunes

» **Playability**
Yoshi feels great, throwing yarn balls and floating with ease – a vast improvement over 2014's sluggish Yoshi's New Island

» **Entertainment**
Though best played alone, Yoshi's Woolly World is the best platformer starring the dinosaur since the Super Nintendo original

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Bring Your Amiibos [But Not Yoshi]

Woolly World lets players use just about every one of their Amiibos to unlock a special skin for Yoshi. It's a great, unobtrusive way for players to get use out of Nintendo's figures, and see their favorite characters make a cameo. Using a Yoshi Amiibo (either the cute knit one included with some versions of the game or the Smash Bros. or Mario Party one) lets players control two Yoshis simultaneously. Two Yoshis appear on-screen with your inputs making both react at the same time. Much like the co-op, I'm glad it exists as a bonus novelty, but from a practical perspective it's immediately confusing and a huge hindrance. I could not remove the second Yoshi fast enough.

Yoshi's Woolly World

Yoshi's best solo adventure in two decades

Following the debut of Yoshi's Island on Super Nintendo in 1995, Mario's thankless babysitter has seen a number of sequels take advantage of his egg-throwing and float-jumping abilities. Each was disappointing for its own reasons, but not Woolly World. After 20 years, Super Mario World 2 finally has a worthwhile successor.

Woolly World looks fantastic, and though its yarn aesthetic is not an original one (developer Good-Feel created 2010's Kirby's Epic Yarn), the game expertly embraces a feel all its own by presenting a world that truly feels knitted together. It's the perfect follow-up to the 1995 original's crayon-drawn style, and I was still remarking on the small touches and details of the world up to the last level.

The gameplay is similar to Yoshi's Island, with the ability to eat enemies to create yarn balls (the new egg stand-in), throw those yarn balls, and use a jump that fits comfortably between a double-jump and full flight. It feels smooth and is a vast improvement over last year's 3DS title, Yoshi's New Island, which felt slow and sometimes unresponsive.

It's hard to make a crocheted blanket intimidating, so you would be forgiven for assuming Woolly World is easy. It can be easy if you so desire, with its Mellow Mode and badges that give Yoshi temporary power-ups like immunity to fire and lava, but a challenge is here if you want it. I never threw the controller down in desperation, but I lost a surprising number of lives in more than a few sections. I embraced the challenge,

however, and was appreciative that it never became a boring walk in a beautiful park.

If the standard challenge isn't enough, you can always add a second player. Co-op is one of the big back-of-the-box bullet points, and while I am happy the option exists, I found it much more enjoyable without a second player. There isn't much real estate in the levels for two players, and it was always a struggle to figure out who the screen was following, leading to surprise deaths. Griefing your co-op partner can be fun, as you can eat them and turn them into a yarn ball or spit them away from the action, but it turns out this isn't a great way to progress.

Along with collecting flowers and

hidden Miiverse stamps (red coins in previous games) every level contains five skeins of colored yarn. Collecting them unlocks new skins for Yoshi, and it's fun to see what each skin looks like, even if some of them are ugly. It makes searching every nook and cranny of each level worthwhile, as I found myself frequently changing out my Yoshi for the latest style.

Yoshi's Woolly World is the Wii U's best-looking game, as well as the best Yoshi's Island since the original Super Nintendo title. It has a great balance of challenge, exciting bosses, callbacks to the first game, and enough new mechanics and touches to make it easily stand above each attempt at creating a Yoshi's Island successor of the past two decades. ■ **Kyle Hilliard**
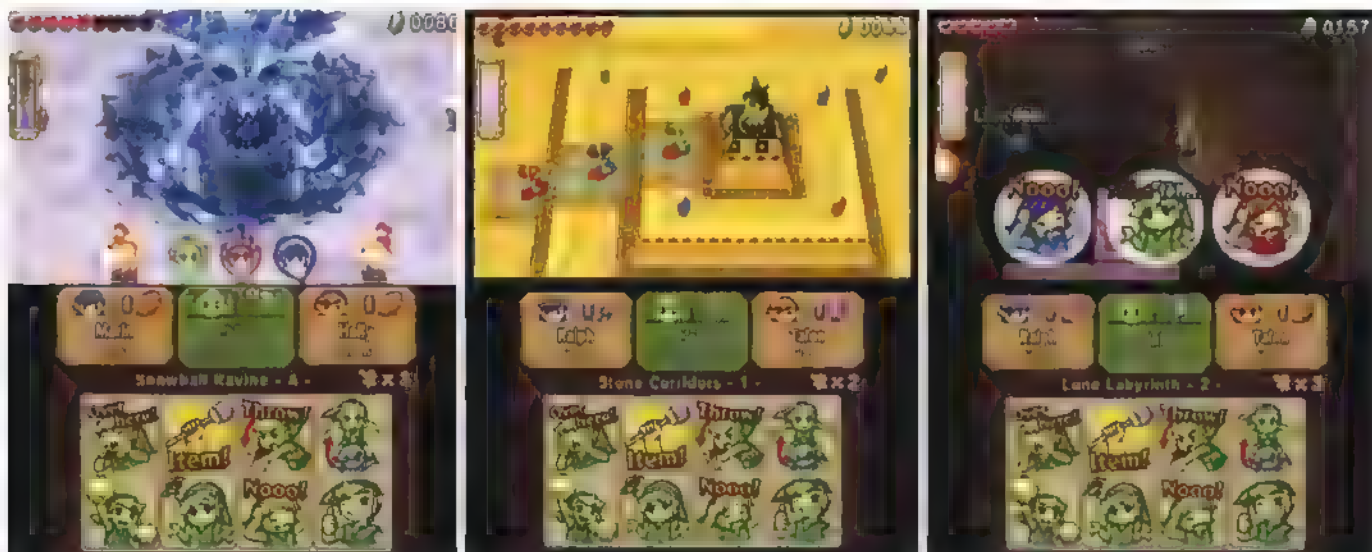
The Legend Of Zelda: Tri Force Heroes

Welcome to the Drablands

7.25

With A Link Between Worlds firmly placed in our rearview mirror and the release of Zelda's next console adventure currently existing in an ambiguous future, Nintendo decided to return to A Link Between World's art style and mechanics for a new title to hold fans over. Nintendo pulled this same trick back in 2000 with Majora's Mask to phenomenal results, and while the intention is admirable here, the outcome isn't as good.

Tri Force Heroes takes place in the world of Hytopia. The princess has been cursed by a witch and is forced to wear a black leotard in lieu of her typical high fashion. A call for heroes is put out to save the princess' style, and this is where you (and others) step in. The setup is silly, and Tri Force embraces the vibe, poking fun at some of Zelda's tropes and offering a cast of humorous characters who all understand that in terms of Zelda adventures, this one is pretty low stakes. The tone and matching music are some of the highlights.

You can play through a series of levels in the Drablands by yourself or as part of a group of three (unfortunately, there is no option for two-player outside of a versus mode) to collect items that can be used to craft new outfits with assorted abilities. I liked unlocking new outfits, and each one is a substantial reward, but the frequency of and route to acquiring them is where the game hits a snag.

The levels straddle the line between a typical Zelda dungeon with puzzles and straight-on action to varying degrees. To get the items needed to unlock outfits, you must replay these levels repeatedly, but the dungeons – as much as I admire them – are not particularly fun to replay. When you know the solutions, they become repetitive, and because Zelda's 2D action has never been the series' draw, the more action-focused levels tire quickly. It takes a long time to get to the reward at the end of each series of levels, and there is no guarantee you will get the piece you need at the end.

By the time I finished the game, I had only unlocked about a third of the costumes, and their bonuses (like increased attack power or imperviousness to certain obstacles) were too little too late. You can add additional challenges to your replays for different items, but these mostly made me want to revisit levels less.

Tri Force Heroes never hooks into a satisfying loop of playing the same levels over and over for increased reward, but it does do three-player cooperative play very well. Every level takes advantage of the necessity of three players, whether you're creating the stacked totem of Links to reach high areas, hitting switches in the right order, or working together to dispatch enemies quickly. The built-in communication tools, which are a gallery of images you can call onto the screen for specific interactions, work surprisingly well. Even playing locally, we found ourselves relying on the icons to make it through the levels without issue. Thankfully, playing by yourself also offers a satisfying experience. You lose the speed and job distribution of three players, but you gain total control as you switch between the three Links.

Tri Force Heroes does co-op well, but the repetitive gameplay loop simply isn't satisfying. The rewards are worthwhile, but the journey gets tiresome before making it to the final boss. Tonally, the game has a great style and welcoming sense of humor, but I found little reason to continue to revisit the Drablands after my initial ventures. ▪ **Kyle Hilliard**

» **Concept**
Use A Link Between Worlds' visual style and gameplay to craft a multiplayer Zelda experience that values teamwork and streamlines communication

» **Graphics**
Bright, colorful, and expressive, Tri Force Heroes looks great even if it doesn't technically impress

» **Sound**
Though different from your typical Zelda soundtrack, the French tunes are fun and memorable

» **Playability**
The game plays as smoothly as its predecessor, A Link Between Worlds. Movement and sword swinging both feel great

» **Entertainment**
It never settles into the replayable gameplay loop it clearly aspires to, but Tri Force Heroes offers some decent Zelda action

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

8 | Prison Architect

Platform PC **Release** October 6 **Rating** NR

Every riot, escape attempt, and execution brings you a step closer to building the perfect prison — all accompanied by the amusing (and sometimes horrifying) moments that emerge naturally in any good simulation. – Joe Juba

4 | Armikrog

Platform PC **Release** September 30 **Rating** NR

Pencil Test Studios clearly needed more time to fix the litany of embarrassing bugs that plague Armikrog at launch. Even then, it wouldn't have helped the overly simplistic story and bland puzzles – Jeff Marchiafava

7 | Might & MagicHeroes VII

Platform PC **Release** September 29 **Rating** T

If you're a die-hard Might & Magic Heroes fan, this addition to your collection is probably justified for the skirmishing alone, but it does little to tread new ground. If you've always wondered about breaking into the series, one of the classics would be a better choice. – Daniel Tack

5.5 | Fatal Frame: Maiden Of The Black Water

Platform Wii U **Release** October 22 **Rating** M

Some horror games skillfully wield repetition as a tool, letting players grow accustomed to the familiar to set up scares both subtle and cuss-worthy. Unfortunately, Maiden of the Black Water is waterlogged with repeated environments and monotonous phantasmagorical photo sessions. – Tim Turi

8 | The Beginner's Guide

Platform PC **Release** October 1 **Rating** NR

Filling your head with questions that have no easy answers, The Beginner's Guide is confusing, thought provoking, and unlike anything you've ever played. – Jeff Marchiafava

7 | Chibi-Robo! Zip Lash

Platform 3DS **Release** October 9 **Rating** E

Zip Lash isn't the game that's ultimately going to convert people into being Chibi Robo fans; it's a competent platformer, but it sticks too close to the genre manual and is missing a much needed spark. – Jeff Cork

6.5 | Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5

Platform PS4, Xbox One
Release September 29 **Rating** T

The gaming landscape has changed a lot since Tony Hawk's heyday, and this title is stuck in a no man's land between not being good enough to replicate the past nor ambitious enough to move the franchise forward. – Matthew Kato

6.5 | NBA Live 16

Platform PS4, Xbox One
Release September 29 **Rating** E

Not being up to par with its stellar rival is forgivable, but NBA Live 16 lacks a point of distinction that justifies its existence to basketball fans – Matt Bertz

PLAYSTATION 4		
Batman: Arkham Knight	9.5	Aug-15
Destiny: The Taken King	9.5	Nov-16
Devil May Cry 4:		
Special Edition	8.5	Aug-15
Disgaea 5:		
Alliance of Vengeance	8.5	Nov-15
Disney Infinity 3.0	8.5	Oct-15
Dragon Quest Heroes: The World Tree's		
Woe and the Blight Below	8	Nov-15
Everybody's Gone to the Rapture	7	Oct-15
FIFA 16	8.75	Nov-15
Galak-Z: The Dimensional	8	Oct-15
Game of Thrones Episode 4:		
Sons of Winter	8	Aug-15
God of War III		
Remastered	9	Sep-15
King's Quest Chapter 1		
A Knight to Remember	8	Oct-15
Lego Dimensions	8.75	Nov-15
Lego Jurassic World	6	Aug-15
Mad Max	7.5	Nov-15
Madden NFL 16	8.75	Oct-15
Metal Gear Solid V:		
The Phantom Pain	9.25	Oct-15
N++	8	Oct-15
NHL 16	7.5	Nov-15
Planetside 2	7.75	Sep-15
Pro Evolution Soccer 2016	9	Nov-15
Rock Band 4	8.75	Nov-15
Rocket League	9	Sep-15
Rory McIlroy PGA Tour	7	Sep-15
Skylanders SuperChargers	6.5	Nov-15
Soma	8.5	Nov-15
Tearaway Unfolded	8	Nov-15
Tembo the Badass Elephant	7	Oct-15
Until Dawn	9	Oct-15
Volume	8.75	Oct-15
Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, The	9.75	Jul-15

XBOX ONE		
Batman: Arkham Knight	9.5	Aug-15
Destiny: The Taken King	9.5	Nov-15
Devil May Cry 4:		
Special Edition	8.5	Aug-15
Disney Infinity 3.0	8.5	Oct-15
FIFA 16	8.75	Nov-15
Forza Motorsport 6	7.75	Nov-15
Game of Thrones Episode 4:		
Sons of Winter	8	Aug-15
Gears of War: Ultimate Edition	8	Oct-15
King's Quest Chapter 1		
A Knight to Remember	8	Oct-15
Lego Dimensions	8.75	Nov-15
Lego Jurassic World	6	Aug-15
Lovers in a Dangerous Spacetime	8	Nov-15
Mad Max	7.5	Nov-15
Madden NFL 16	8.75	Oct-15
Magic Duels	8.75	Sep-15
Metal Gear Solid V:		
The Phantom Pain	9.25	Oct-15
NHL 16	7.5	Nov-15
Pro Evolution Soccer 2016	9	Nov-15
Rare Replay	8.75	Oct-15
Rock Band 4	8.75	Nov-15
Rory McIlroy PGA Tour	7	Sep-15
Skylanders SuperChargers	6.5	Nov-15
Tembo the Badass Elephant	7	Oct-15
Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, The	9.75	Jul-15

PLAYSTATION 3		
Destiny: The Taken King	9.5	Nov-15
Disney Infinity 3.0	8.5	Oct-15
Game of Thrones Episode 4:		
Sons of Winter	8	Aug-15
King's Quest Chapter 1		
A Knight to Remember	8	Oct-15
Lego Dimensions	8.75	Nov-15
Lego Jurassic World	6	Aug-15
Madden NFL 16	8.75	Oct-15

Metal Gear Solid V:		
The Phantom Pain	9.25	Oct-15
Skylanders SuperChargers	6.5	Nov-15

XBOX 360		
Destiny: The Taken King	9.5	Nov-15
Disney Infinity 3.0	8.5	Oct-15
Game of Thrones Episode 4:		
Sons of Winter	8	Aug-15
King's Quest Chapter 1		
A Knight to Remember	8	Oct-15
Lego Dimensions	8.75	Nov-15
Lego Jurassic World	6	Aug-15
Madden NFL 16	8.75	Oct-15
Metal Gear Solid V:		
The Phantom Pain	9.25	Oct-15
Skylanders SuperChargers	6.5	Nov-15

WII U		
Disney Infinity 3.0	8.5	Oct-15
Skylanders SuperChargers	6.5	Nov-15
Lego Dimensions	8.75	Nov-15
Splatoon	7.75	Aug-15
Super Mario Maker	9	Oct-15

PC		
Batman: Arkham Knight	9.5	Aug-15
Broken Age: Act II	9.25	Jun-15
Devil May Cry 4		
Special Edition	8.5	Aug-15
FIFA 16	8.75	Nov-15
Game of Thrones Episode 4:		
Sons of Winter	8	Aug-15
Gears of War: Ultimate Edition	8	Oct-15
Guild of Dungeoneering	7	Oct-15
Hearthstone: The Grand		
Tournament	9	Nov-15
Her Story	8.5	Sep-15
Heroes of the Storm	9.25	Aug-15
King's Quest Chapter 1		
A Knight to Remember	8	Oct-15

Lego Jurassic World	6	Aug-15
Lovers in a Dangerous Spacetime	8	Nov-15
Mad Max	7.5	Nov-15
Magic Duels	8.75	Sep-15
Magicka 2	7.25	Aug-15
Massive Chalice	8	Aug-15
Metal Gear Solid V:		
The Phantom Pain	9.25	Oct-15
Path of Exile:		
The Awakening	8.5	Sep-15
Pillars of Eternity	9.25	Jun-15
Pro Evolution Soccer 2016	9	Nov-15
Ronin	7.75	Aug-15
Soma	8.5	Nov-15
Sunset	5.75	Aug-15
Talos Principle:		
Road to Gehenna, The	8.25	Oct-15
Tembo the Badass Elephant	7	Oct-15
Volume	8.75	Oct-15
Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, The	9.75	Jul-15
You Must Build A Boat	8	Aug-15

3DS		
Animal Crossing:		
Happy Home Designer	8	Nov-15
Etrian Odyssey 2 Untold:		
The Fafnir Knight	8	Sep-15
Puzzle & Dragons Z + Puzzle & Dragons		
Super Mario Bros. Edition	9	Jul-15

VITA		
Danganronpa Another Episode		
Ultra Despair Girls	5.5	Oct-15
Persona 4: Dancing All Night	7.5	Nov-15

IOS		
Hearthstone: The Grand		
Tournament	8	Nov-15
Her Story	8.5	Sep-15
You Must Build A Boat	8	Aug-15

Japanese Game Subtitle Or Made-Up Crap?

When it comes to bad video game titles, no one exhibits more raw talent than Japanese developers. They've turned terrible subtitles into an art form – one in need of some much-deserved recognition. After all, some Japanese game subtitles are so perfectly awful, you can't make them up! Or can you?

Below is a list of Japanese game subtitles. Some of them are real games that you could go out and buy right now, and others are totally made-up gibberish. See if you can spot the difference by circling the appropiate answer. Bonus challenge: Can you name the main titles of the real entries? If so, no one cares!

by Jeff Marchiafava

1. Ode To An Unborn Star — REAL | CRAP

2. Anonymous Fever Riot — REAL | CRAP

3. Knell Of Ar Ciel — REAL | CRAP

4. Unlosing Ranger vs. Darkdeath Evilman — REAL | CRAP

5. Ultra Revenge Angels — REAL | CRAP

6. Eine Belastung Von Mist — REAL | CRAP

7. Absence Of Detention — REAL | CRAP

8. The Oath-Breaker's Burden — REAL | CRAP

9. Reward Unwanted — REAL | CRAP

10. Rememories Vol. 2 — REAL | CRAP

11. Re;Birth3: V Generation — REAL | CRAP

12. Dawn Of Operation Panties, Dood! — REAL | CRAP

13. Heroines Infinite Duel — REAL | CRAP

14. The World Tree's Woe And The Blight Below — REAL | CRAP

15. Wrath Of Mecha-Gundam — REAL | CRAP

16. Half Heat Heaven — REAL | CRAP

17. Final Chapter Prologue — REAL | CRAP

18. The Alchemist Of Abkha Kaban — REAL | CRAP

19. Lament Of A Happy Misery — REAL | CRAP

20. A School Of Hope And White Wings — REAL | CRAP

SCORE & RANK				
20 Correct Was cheating worth it, cheater?	**16-19 Correct** You're way too good at this... Do you work for Atlus?	**11-15 Correct** Don't be too proud – you did only slightly better than randomly guessing.	**6-10 Correct** Did you mistake this magazine for your latest issue of *Reader's Digest*?	**0-5 Correct** Your ignorance is statistically improbable. Way to beat the odds!

1.Real 2.Crap 3.Real 4.Real 5.Crap 6.Crap 7.Real 8.Crap 9.Crap 10.Crap 11.Real 12.Real 13.Real 14.Real 15.Crap 16.Crap 17.Real 18.Crap 19.Crap 20.Real

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